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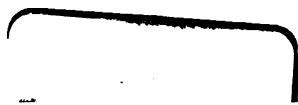
FOUR STUDIES OF LOVE



A. W. DUBOURG.



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FOUR STUDIES OF LOVE.

“‘Shepherd, what is love? I pray thee tell!—
‘It is that fountain, and that well,
Where pleasure and repentance dwell;
It is, perhaps, that passing bell
That tolls us all to heaven or hell;
And this is love, as I heard tell.’”

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

FOUR STUDIES OF LOVE.

BY A. W. DUBOURG,

JOINT AUTHOR OF THE COMEDY, "NEW MEN AND OLD ACRES."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1877.

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25/- d. 903.

[Reprinted from the *Temple Bar Magazine*.]

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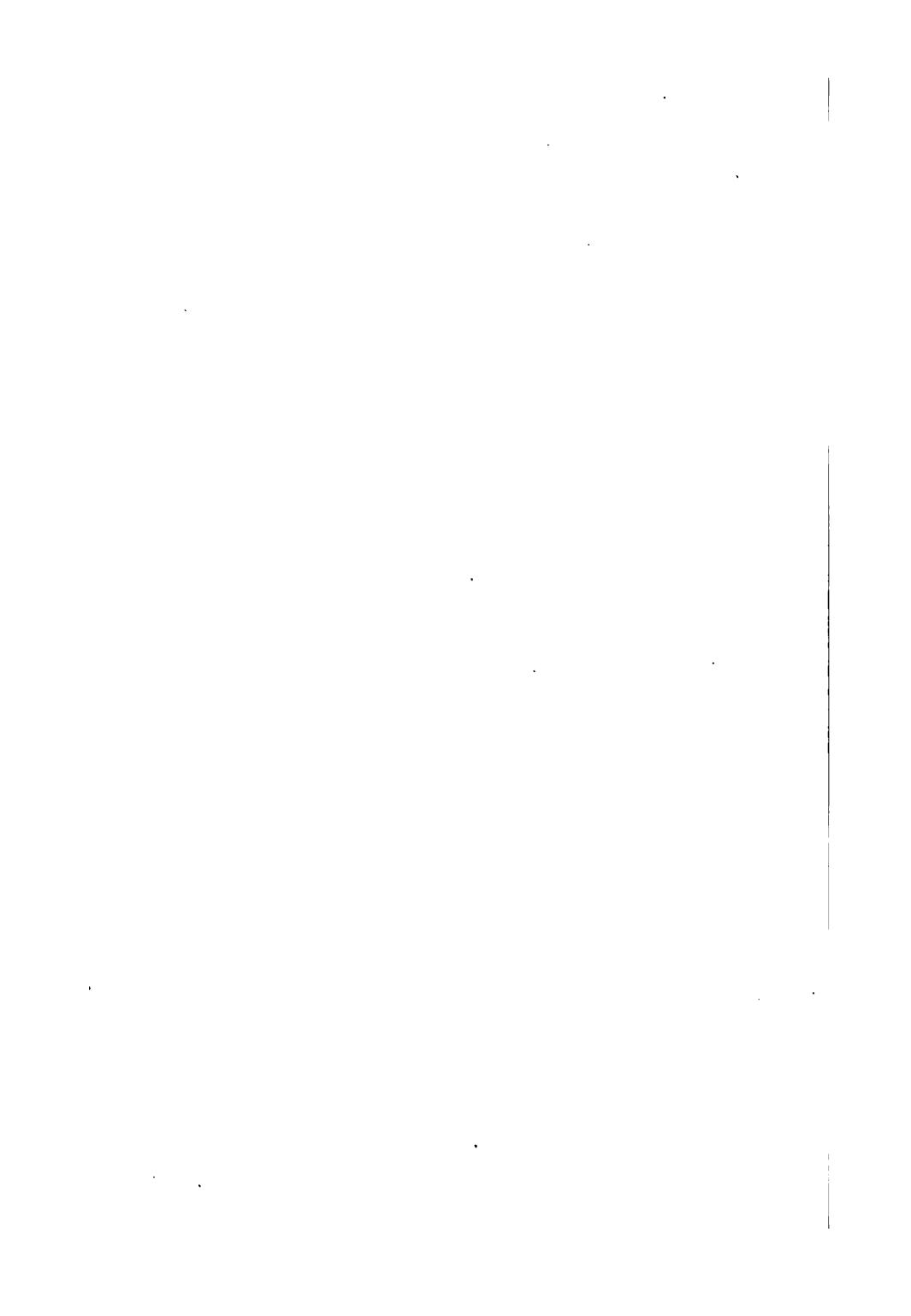
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I.

SAVED BY LOVE.

(AN OLD MAN'S DARLING.)

Continued.



AN OLD MAN'S DARLING.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS LINDSAY DONS HER ARMOUR IN HASTE.

WHEN Mabel entered the sitting-room, they were all struck by the appearance of her face ; the traces of recent tears were indeed plainly visible. Mr. Simeon had come by invitation to enjoy a brace of partridges, the first of the season, which were in process of roasting for supper. Mr. Simeon's presence acted as a certain restraint on Mabel's feelings ; she felt thankful for his presence, however, because she was very anxious that Mary should be as little agitated as possible by the narrative of her important discovery.

She told the story with wonderful nerve and calmness, and she prefaced it by declaring most emphatically that, come what might, the Torquay arrangements would remain as heretofore ; that their home and essential comforts would continue unchanged. This kind and considerate declaration on the part of Mabel, had a very assuaging effect on the anxiety which the discovery of the new will would otherwise naturally have occasioned. Mary, indeed, although she was this evening more than ordinarily fatigued, was thus enabled with perfect calmness to express her usual common-sense, and at the same time thoroughly religious, views with regard to the situation of affairs.

“I will not permit myself,” she said, speaking in a very modest but at the same time decided tone, “to express any opinion on Mr. Vaughan’s conduct, because I might be led to use uncharitable language on the subject, and uncharitable language can never, under any circumstances, be justified in the sight of Heaven, I will only say,

that I fear the old Adam still lingered in poor Mr. Vaughan's heart ; and this sad apprehension certainly entitles him to our commiseration as an unrepentant sinner. It is important for us, however, to express our infinite gratitude to Heaven that, in a temporal sense, carnal things have been really so little changed by this new arrangement of the estate. As far as I understand dear Mabel's account of the will, Mrs. Corley takes half the property absolutely ; the other half, together with the house, furniture, and effects, plate included, is settled upon Mabel for life."

"Or until she marries," volunteered Mr. Smith very meekly.

"Did you say that, Mabel?" asked Mary, slightly, very slightly, ruffled by her father's interruption.

"Father is quite right," answered Mabel, endeavouring to conceal her feelings. She clenched her hands under the table ; they could not therefore observe the action.

"Well," exclaimed Mary, "I do not think,

in forming our estimate of affairs, that we need lay too much stress upon that point. I have myself never been an advocate for second marriages, and I must say I think Mr. Vaughan was perfectly justified in giving evidence of his feelings upon that point; so, with this additional limitation—for life or until marriage—dear Mabel stands possessed of quite sufficient means to give full effect to the generous feelings of her nature. I am not quite sure," she added, in a tone of great diffidence—"it is, perhaps, too early to judge correctly; but I think we may see in this altered state of affairs, a manifest purpose on the part of Heaven, to check any undue leaning upon mere works, by curtailing to a certain extent this arm of the flesh—and perhaps, although the execution of Mr. Vaughan's new will was undoubtedly antecedent to Mabel's benevolent actions—still I am inclined to think that a large gift to persons partaking of the errors of Rome could not be otherwise than repugnant to the will of

Heaven. I speak, of course, very humbly upon such a profound subject—Mr. Simeon is fortunately at hand to correct my limited knowledge of Scriptural truth—but I venture to think that the monition of Heaven was, so to speak, antedated in that will with a view to correcting the subsequent errors of a loving but fallible human judgment.”

Mr. Simeon was deeply impressed by the great subtlety of Mary’s theological views, and he hastened very warmly to endorse her opinion, adding thereto, on his own part, many very pertinent quotations from Holy Writ.

“ Darling Mabel,” cried Mary warmly, and weak as she was, she drew her chair close to her sister, and kissed her with the utmost tenderness, tears standing in her eyes, “ you can only err in one way, dearest—in listening too much to the promptings of a truly kind and benevolent human heart. But let us all rejoice in that it has pleased Heaven to root up some of those rank weeds from your earthly path, by diminish-

ing the temptation to rest on carnal works. Far from this new will being an evil, I am disposed to look upon its curtailments in the light of a great and signal blessing—a blessing of monition and godly correction; and yet a monition mercifully tempered by love, for all the comforts and solaces of our earthly pilgrimage, which we now enjoy so richly, might have been snatched away; but they are still vouchsafed to us abundantly, yea, in a full measure heaped up."

Mary seemed, indeed, quite joyful at the end of her comments—as far, at least, as her weak bodily state permitted the expression of joy—but Mabel, though she strove as much as she could, was unable to restrain her tears. “Precious darling Mabel,” exclaimed Mary, with tender warmth, “I will pray very earnestly that you may be led at last into the happy path I am mercifully permitted to tread—that you may be at last vouchsafed a vision of the truth as I behold it.”

“Amen!” said Mr. Simeon very solemnly;

he would willingly have offered up a prayer fitted to the occasion, but Mabel could not have endured that torture. Very fortunately, however, Mary was too fatigued to enjoy the precious privilege so graciously tendered ; and, leaning for needful support on Mabel's arm, she returned to her bedroom. Mabel helped her to undress. "Mabel, darling," exclaimed Mary as her sister was about to leave the room ; "the Lord has sent you to be our comfort and support in earthly things ; you must make me, as far as it lies in my feeble power, your help and comfort in spiritual difficulties. Good-night, dearest. Go down now, please ; Mr. Simeon will be wanting his supper. I hope you will enjoy the partridges ; these temporal blessings are not for me, but I do not repine—the man promised they should be young birds, but I fear he is not yet in a state of grace, and young birds, they say, are very scarce this year ; but it is our duty to endure all things meekly. God bless you, darling sister."

Mabel did not go down to supper—she went to her own room, and sent an excuse by the servant. “Alone now,” she murmured, in her despair. “Oh, God, how fearfully alone I am!” She placed the will carefully under her pillow; she was resolved it should never leave her personal custody until it was safely delivered into Mr. Barton’s own hands. Deep into the night she lay awake, striving to unravel the many tangled threads of doubt, perplexity, dismay, and fear.

Mary’s doubts were but too well founded—it was manifest that the poult er in question was still in an incomplete state of regeneration. One bird, indeed, was young and plump, but the other bird had seen far too much of the world of roots and the ways of men. Mr. Simeon, however, thoroughly enjoyed the young bird; the bread sauce and the brown gravy were both excellently made, and served very hot.

“I wish the dear girls upstairs had been with us,” said Mr. Smith warmly—he had

partaken of the old bird with great contentment; "but I fear dear Mabel feels this alteration deeply, although she says very little."

Mr. Simeon alluded very pointedly to Mabel in his prayer of thankfulness that evening—they all felt so unfeignedly thankful: nothing was to be altered in their life of quiet, substantial comfort; they could not help rejoicing greatly in their thankfulness. Mr. Simeon was induced, at Mr. Smith's earnest solicitation, to resume, for the first time that season, his one accustomed tumbler of hot whisky and water, which he enjoyed thoroughly; and meantime, close at hand, a great battle was being fought in a woman's soul.

Mabel went up to town by the earliest train on the following morning; the envelope containing the will was carefully stitched to the inside of her dress. On arriving at Paddington, she drove straight to Mr. Barton's office.

"Is Mr. Barton in his room?" she asked

anxiously of the clerk. To her infinite relief Mr. Barton was at the office, and able to see her without delay. Mr. Barton was naturally very surprised by this unexpected visit from his client.

“I have discovered Mr. Vaughan’s last will and testament,” she said, speaking in a low constrained voice, and, turning away for a moment from Mr. Barton, she drew the will from her bosom. “Thank God, it is now safe in your hands; my duty is over,” and she laid the document on Mr. Barton’s desk.

“Heyday!” cried Mr. Barton, as soon as he could recover from his astonishment; “who the deuce drew it?” He looked at the date and signatures. “Subsequent will, no doubt; ‘John Watson, solicitor, and his clerk, Henry Biggs.’ Watson died, if I remember rightly,” observed Mr. Barton, “a few days before Mr. Vaughan’s decease.”

“I remember that Mr. Watson came to see my husband two or three times, and had long interviews with him. Mr. Vau-

ghan told me it was about Sleaford's affairs ; he was their solicitor, I believe."

" Just so," answered Mr. Barton. " Where on earth did you discover it ? I searched every possible hole and corner."

" In the top of the case which contains my diamonds—yesterday afternoon ; it was the first time the case had been opened since Mr. Vaughan's death. I was going to send the diamonds as a present to Emily Corley on her marriage."

Mr. Barton read through the will.

" Mr. Vaughan knew very well that I should never have drawn a will of this nature," he remarked in a grave voice. " Well, at all events, we have only one thing to do. I see I am joint executor with Mr. Corley ; the new will must be propounded, and the former will cancelled. Fortunately for all persons concerned, this discovery has been made before the distribution of the property, according to your very generous intentions, has been carried out. In itself, the will is clear enough. It restricts you to a life

interest in half the realized property—saving always to your use the house at Dulwich and general effects therein—or until your re-marriage—that acts as absolute forfeiture of everything. In order to ensure a provision for your family in case of your own decease, it will be of course advisable that you should immediately insure your life—clearly the sooner the better.”

He raised his head and looked at her.

“I should say that yours was a very good life, Mrs. Vaughan; a good, long, healthy life; just the sort of life offices like to accept.”

She bent down her face: a long life meant prolonged misery.

“Of course if you marry again,” he observed—“but such an act would be, under the present circumstances, speaking in the mildest terms, an act of insanity; we need not therefore take that point into consideration.”

Mr. Barton’s eyes were old; he did

not perceive the agony which his client suffered.

“ In that case, however, as in the case of your death, two-thirds absolutely of what you now hold for life would go to Mrs. Corley, and one-third to St. Ronald’s Hospital.”

“ I don’t of course understand business matters,” faltered Mabel, striving to command her voice ; “ but would it be possible for me to surrender that portion of my interest to St. Ronald’s Hospital, on payment by them of the sum equivalent to the value of my life ? ”

“ I quite understand,” answered Mr. Barton ; “ but you must observe that the money falls to them on your re-marriage as well as on your death ; how it would be possible equitably to assess those two conditions, I scarcely know. Then, again, we must remember that St. Ronald’s Hospital is so notoriously wealthy. If Mr. Vaughan had only left his property to some struggling East-end hospital in a wretched district,

our course might have been easier ; but just consider the locality of St. Ronald's—the very centre point of the West end of London, surrounded by persons of enormous wealth—palaces indeed ; persons dwelling, too, in the very hotbed, so to speak, of religious influences of all kinds, high church, low church, and polite dissent—religion not only a faith, but a fashion ; and under every form of faith, continual appeals to charity as covering a multitude of sins. Could any institution be more likely to reap substantial advantages from such a state of affairs ? Many sins, most probably, and a great superfluity of money most certainly. Why, if they had only building space, they could half cover Hyde Park with bricks and mortar. I fear we can't hope for much help from the St. Ronald's people."

" But you could try," urged Mabel in anxious tone ; " you could make an offer, could you not ? "

" I could try, and will try, if you desire it," answered Mr. Barton ; " but I fear it is hopeless."

“Oh, do try !” cried Mabel with despair in her voice, for Mr. Barton’s words had blighted the one hope she had formed during her journey. Up to this point of their interview she had been so perfectly calm and self-possessed, that Mr. Barton was all the more astonished by her change of demeanour.

“Promise me faithfully to do your best,” she exclaimed with vehemence, and she rose from her chair and came close to his desk. “I will tell you the whole truth. I am in love ; I am engaged to be married. Have mercy—have pity for me ; I have had pity for others—you know that. Be my friend ; help me if you can.” She clasped his hands, falling on her knees at his chair.

The words made Mr. Barton’s heart beat, although, indeed, he was an old man, and very matter-of-fact, and rather cynical, with a large store of worldly experience. He begged her to get up, he insisted upon her getting up. She obeyed him at last, and then, overwhelmed by a deep sense of

shame, she sank back into the chair she had previously occupied. But her feelings were stronger than shame, and they forced her to speak.

“Despise me as much as you will,” she exclaimed—“condemn me, if you choose; but I love with my whole heart and soul—I must love; no accursed will can destroy that; but I think, if you knew all, you would not despise me.”

“I do not despise you,” he answered. “God forbid! I have long honoured and respected you. I have never seen anything in your conduct which merited contempt, and at this moment I honour and respect you as much as ever.”

“God bless you,” she cried.

“I won’t deceive you by raising any false hopes; this will, as far as I now see, is, legally, a good and valid will. I fear very little can be done. I must have time to think, and I must ask you to leave me now, as I have a very urgent and important engagement.” He led her towards the door.

“Be brave and patient,” he whispered in kindly words. “I’m not a preacher, my dear lady; I’m only an old cynical man of the world, but I may tell you that you have often preached to me.”

“When?” asked Mabel with surprise.

“When you behaved like a true and noble woman,” he answered.

The clerk opened the door and announced the expected client.

“Good-bye,” he said, in a rather flurried manner; and Mabel followed the clerk out of the room.

The client brushed by Mabel as he entered the room, “Handsome client, egad! A widow, too—money, I say? Why, bless me, Barton, what the deuce?”

“I have been very much pained,” answered Mr. Barton; “and these are a few tears.”

“I should have thought you were too old for that.”

“I should have thought so too,” rejoined Mr. Barton dryly, and he wiped away the

tears. "Well, do those fellows intend to fight that bond or not?" and in another moment Mr. Barton was deeply absorbed in very important business.

So with her best hope rudely shaken, Mabel sought her lover at Miss Lindsay's residence, but her heart failed her; doubts are born of a downcast spirit. To have doubted her lover's constancy in the flush of wealth would have been an impossibility, but as the body is prone to contract diseases in its weakness, so the soul in its hours of depression falls a prey to doubt. "This love," she cried, "oh, Lord! leave me that, and I can bear all. I can bear the loss of wealth; I can endure the bitterness of dependency—the bitterness of all other sacrifices; but in mercy leave me his love; leave me that one pillar of faith on earth, and I shall be strong and brave."

It was weary walking up the garden path to Miss Lindsay's door. "Miss Lindsay was not at home," the maid said, "but Mr. Foster was in the parlour," and Mabel was

ushered into her lover's presence. He was amazed at her visit.

"Don't kiss me, Frank," she exclaimed, as he advanced towards her, "I have come to tell you something which is very sad; you must hear that first. Oh, Frank," she cried in a voice of deep concern, as she gazed at him, "you are not making proper progress; you are still looking wretchedly weak: what does the doctor say?"

"Don't be alarmed, darling; he says Germany—he's promised to let me go in a few days more."

"Sit down, Frank—no, not close to me; sit there. I will sit in this chair till I have told you all," and she sat in a chair somewhat removed from his. She told him the story of the new will, and the terrible penalty it contained. "If I marry again," she said in a deliberate voice, "I shall be a beggar. I asked you to marry a rich woman: if I marry you, I shall lose everything; we shall both be beggars. I am only doing my duty by releasing you from this engagement."

“Mabel!” he exclaimed in a voice of deprecation.

“I repeat, my duty; I do release you from this engagement.”

“Never!” he exclaimed. “I swear, never,” and he started up.

“Hear me to the end,” she continued. “I shall have nothing; you will have nothing: our first engagement was broken off on these grounds; we are older; are we less wise now?”

“A thousand times less wise,” he answered with vehemence; “a thousand times more true.” He came to her, and kneeling as she sat, clasped her in his arms and kissed her.

“Oh, Mabel, cruel Mabel, to doubt me now! You and I are one—joined by God’s mercy; nothing can divide us—mine on earth, mine in heaven!”

“Amen,” she cried with exultation. “Oh, Lord, with my whole heart and soul I acknowledge this mercy. I am very rich, I have lost nothing, because I possess all.

Oh, Frank, I can bear anything when you are at my side. My woman's heart falters when it is alone ; but I am so strong now. You can guide me through it all—through this awful maze of perplexity.” She threw her arms round his neck, clinging to him with fervent grasp: he was hers, then—love assured for ever ; a sacred bond that naught could break bound them together. And yet, as she clung to him, her joy was presently clouded by a terrible thought, which, like the thin, keen edge of a steel wedge, was driven between their close-linked hearts—duty, the home at Torquay. She could endure poverty for herself, but not for them ; how were they to live when she was a beggar ? And her arms lost their force and fell from his neck, and she shrank away in absolute anguish from his grasp, and burst into tears.

“ Oh, Mabel, why this sudden change ? ” he asked in amazement.

“ I am without hope,” she answered, starting up from her chair. “ Mr. Barton

could give me no hope about any arrangement with St. Ronald's. I have no hope of mercy or consideration from Mrs. Corley ; I know she will never help me with a penny."

"But, Mabel, dear Mabel," he exclaimed in protest, "you are mine, whatever happens." He tried once more to clasp her to him.

"Leave me, Frank," she said mournfully. "A minute ago I held you so tightly in my arms that I thought in my fervour that no power on earth could drag you from me ; and then that torturing fear of *their* poverty rose in my mind. Could I be happy amid their reproaches—or rather their silent, uncomplaining endurance of poverty and privation ?—the wealth that could have helped them, lost for the sake of my happiness!"

"But mine too," he answered in a tone of reproach.

"I was thinking of myself ; but I can't help that, for my marriage would be my happiness and their loss. God help me in

this agony," she cried. "That thought just now forced me from your arms ; it would turn into bitterness all the joy of my marriage."

He turned away from her with trembling steps.

"Oh, Frank--perhaps it is not true ; perhaps we are only deceiving ourselves ; perhaps, after all, God has not given us to one another. I thought so, believed so, till this awful fear rose in my soul. Why can't we be heartless, and false, and 'mercenary, and so be saved from all this terrible pain ?"

"Mabel," he gasped, "all this will kill me ; I can't bear it," and he threw himself into a chair. In an instant she was at his side.

"Frank, darling Frank, I don't know what I am saying ; I think my mind is losing itself with all this misery. Nothing shall divide us now. Oh, let us have faith, let us be brave ; all will come right at last." But strive as she would, her words were only words of the lips ; she saw that they

conveyed no assurance to her lover. It was a positive relief when Miss Lindsay entered the room.

“Heyday! bless me,” cried that lady in surprise; “you here, Mabel?”

“Thank Heaven you have come,” answered Mabel, and she flew to Miss Lindsay for support. “I see how ill he is; and I think my words will kill him,” she whispered.

“What’s the matter?” inquired Miss Lindsay, going to the point.

Mabel began her story.

“Beast!” cried Miss Lindsay, the moment the discovery of the new will was mentioned. “Not another word,” she exclaimed; “I know everything: you lose every penny if you marry again. Scoundrel!” And Miss Lindsay shook her clenched fist violently. “Oh, you villain, you have caught me napping, have you? Stolen a march on me, hey? So it’s out at last! You were so quiet too; just like a mischievous child destroying its toys. I wondered why

the Lord had not set me to some fresh work, but it's all plain now ; I thought it was victory, but the battle isn't over. Oh, you pitiful hound ! You made that poor, wretched, mean-spirited man execute this accursed will through vile jealousy ; you made him hide it in the very place you thought his noble-hearted wife would be sure to look immediately after his decease ; you made her find it when she was alone. You fool ! you wanted to tempt her with that infernal temptation, did you ? Destroy the wretched document in her despair, hey ? I can see it all as plain as a pikestaff, and I'll say it out : you mean my dear noble girl to choose between a marriage of poverty, and a life of sin and shame ! ”

“ For Heaven's sake,” interposed Foster, “ not those words, Miss Lindsay ; not those fearful words ! ” Mabel sank into a chair, covering her face with her hands.

But Miss Lindsay in the heat of combat was too excited to give heed to Foster's

protest. "I will tell him his cursed schemes to his face," she cried, her countenance was flushed with anger and indignation. "It's best to let him know that we are up to his vile moves, that we are not afraid to grapple with him in his strength. I repeat, we are not afraid, with the Lord's help, to fight this great battle; these two children of mine are brave and noble, and in God's name we defy you and all your cursed crew. Just wait," she cried defiantly, "till I give the signal to the 'Brazen Vessel,' and sound the alarm in Glasgow; Donald MacTonans won't flinch, I'll warrant that." Miss Lindsay turned to Mabel: "He knows the stuff we are made of, dearest; we shall conquer him, never fear."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ENEMY CARRIES THE OUTWORKS.

THROUGH the discovery of the new will, Mrs. Corley's prayer that she might be one day enabled to show her gratitude for Mabel's generosity was very quickly answered. Mr. Barton's letter to Mrs. Corley announcing her good fortune, and also conveying a sketch of the general purport of the will, duly arrived by the morning's post, and lay on the breakfast-table when Mrs. Corley hustled into the room to make the tea before the family assembled for prayers. The intelligence was very sweet; next to exultation in the acquired money, was the delight of being free from all

obligation to the woman whom in her heart of hearts Mrs. Corley hated.

Mr. Corley with great readiness framed a very fervent extemporaneous prayer applicable to their altered fortunes, and he used it in lieu of the accustomed reference to Mabel. Mrs. Corley rose from her knees with a radiant countenance, and kissed her daughter Emily with great warmth, and, as soon as the servants had left the room, proceeded to enlighten both Emily and her betrothed, who was staying in the house, as to the cause of Mr. Corley's new prayer.

"If Mrs. Vaughan marries again," remarked Mr. Mudford, during the post-substantial or marmalade section of breakfast, "you gain a large increase at once."

"I maintain that a woman ought never to marry a second time," observed Mrs. Corley in a decisive tone, "more particularly if it be contrary to the express injunction of the husband to whom she owes all her fortune; I look upon such an act as impious."

Mrs. Corley's words established the hopelessness of Mabel's appeal for merciful help, and Mabel's own depression of soul as she approached Mrs. Corley's house, was only too true a foreshadowing of the fate which awaited her.

Mabel was never meant to bend the knee in supplication ; her nature was constructed on the grand lines of generosity and self-denial, and the special teaching of her home-life, from the cradle upwards, had only served to strengthen those lines of nobleness. She was at her best and grandest, therefore, when giving to others, or being given for the sake of others ; at her worst when she had to plead for her own self and her own advantage ; but Mrs. Corley was never stronger than when she had self and selfishness to advocate. So the battle that Mabel had to fight was half lost before the first shot had been fired.

Mrs. Corley kissed Mabel on her entrance one of her thoroughly hollow kisses—which chilled Mabel through and through.

“ Well, dear,” she exclaimed, leading Mabel to the sofa, “ this change is a great surprise to us all. As far as I am concerned, it is a very precious satisfaction to feel that dear Jacob really loved me as a brother ought to love a sister, who has always striven to act in a truly sisterly manner. After all, my dear, remembering your very just division of the property under the old will, it will not make any very great difference to your earthly comfort, and you will be able, thanks to Jacob’s goodness, to be a comfort and support to your dear parents, and your poor afflicted sister, whose resignation and sweetness is a lesson to us all.”

“ Amen,” said Mr. Corley, who had sidled into the room.

“ You may be sure,” answered Mabel, “ that I shall never forget my duty towards Mary; but I want,” she stammered—“ although it is very painful to me, to say something about myself. By this new will I forfeit everything if I marry again.”

Mabel bent down her head as she spoke ; Mrs. Corley raised hers significantly towards her husband. " It places me in a very difficult position——"

" Well, my love," observed Mrs. Corley, " your dear husband was always deeply opposed to a woman marrying again—but, really, at the present time, considering that you are a widow of little more than three months, I don't think we need worry ourselves about an event which may never happen."

Mrs. Corley was silent ; she felt convinced that Mabel was in love, she felt that the feelings of society were ranged against Mabel, and she revelled in her triumph.

So the initiative, with all its pain, lay on Mabel. It was an awful struggle ; in the very delicacy of her feelings, she was strongly tempted for a few moments to close the conversation, and leave the house with her purpose unexecuted, and then she thought of the state of anguish and anxiety

in which she had left her lover, and she burst into tears.

“ You said you would help me, when you could ! ” she exclaimed in painful tones ; “ for Heaven’s sake, help me now ! I will tell the whole truth ; I am engaged to be married, but not yet, not for a long time. Oh, Mrs. Corley, don’t turn from me—I say, I am not going to marry yet, God forbid—not till you approve of it, I promise that ; but if I had not engaged myself to Mr. Foster, he would have left England and returned to that awful climate it was a case of life and death—life and death, on my solemn word. Have mercy on us both.”

“ You can marry if you like,” answered Mrs. Corley ; “ this very day if you like—I can’t prevent you.”

“ But I lose every penny,” rejoined Mabel, “ and thirty thousand pounds become yours at once, and the house and everything.”

“ I see it now,” exclaimed Mrs. Corley ;

“my brother was quite right; he knew but too well that you loved that man—loved him, while you were yet his wife.”

“Only help me a little, that is all I ask,” pleaded Mabel, “help me as I helped you, when I held the right over that money.”

“Which, after all, was never yours,” exclaimed Mrs. Corley vindictively, “which never would have been yours, if that will had been searched for properly.”

“I only found it,” she protested meekly, “when I looked for the diamonds to send them to Emily as a wedding gift. I don’t ask a single penny for myself; I ask you to settle an allowance out of that thirty thousand pounds on my parents and Mary. I only ask that boon; he and I can live somehow; starve, if need be; but do have mercy upon them. If I err, let the punishment fall on me, but not on their heads.”

“You positively have the effrontery,” retorted Mrs. Corley, “to ask me to undertake the performance of your sacred family duties, and thereby enable you to act in

defiance of your late husband's most emphatic injunction."

"But, in mercy consider. Had he—has any man—the right to lay this awful burden upon a living being?"

"I will not argue this point, Mrs. Vaughan. I will not allow my brother's sacred wishes to be questioned by his widow. Once for all, if you marry, you take the consequences."

Mabel clung to her with tears, with prayers for mercy—kneeling at her feet—but it was all in vain. Mrs. Corley enjoyed her triumph to the full, and the approval of her conscience added greatly to her enjoyment; for she felt that she was giving effect in the most conscientious manner to the sacred injunctions of Jacob Vaughan.

It was indeed the first time in her life that Mrs. Corley had been enabled to enjoy thoroughly the pleasure of conscientious vindictiveness. So the dead man had his victory over the living woman.

"I'll be bound," exclaimed Mrs. Corley,

as soon as Mabel had left the house, "that she was engaged to that man immediately after Jacob's death—or very likely before. Don't tell me, she knew all about the real will from the first. It was a clever device with her pretended generosity to gain her ends over us. I always had the worst possible opinion of that woman ; thank heaven, she is punished now."

The possible greatness of human nature was, indeed, a sore puzzle to Mrs. Corley ; but she was eminently capable of understanding the theory of its meanness and depravity.

It had been arranged that Mabel should return to Miss Lindsay's house immediately after her interview with the Corleys ; but she could not summon courage to meet her lover, to bear to him the evil tidings which involved the destruction of their dearest hopes. She wandered mechanically back to her own house—hers only in right of widowhood. She thought it would be best that she should not meet Foster again. She

purposed sending for Miss Lindsay, and letting her break to him the news of their inevitable separation; but she seemed in her misery to lack all force and strength for action. In the midst of her depression, Foster was announced.

“You didn’t come to me,” he said, when the servant had left the room. “I could not endure this torture of uncertainty—forgive me, I could not help coming to you. For heaven’s sake, what did they say; is there any hope?”

The emotion of intense anxiety might well have made a strong man weak; but Foster was still weak through the complaint which had been checked, but not vanquished. He sat, or rather sank helplessly into a chair.

“Frank, dear, it’s the worst,” she flew to his side. “Be strong and brave, my own darling. This is an awful time; let’s fight it nobly. Mrs. Corley will not help us.”

“I feared not,” he answered feebly; and

his head sank back, falling on her shoulder, as she knelt close to his chair.

She answered him in a firm voice, speaking with the utmost decision ; for she strove to animate him with her own strength.

“ We should possess nothing, if we married. If that were the only consideration, it would be my duty and my dearest happiness to marry you at all risks, but that household at Torquay stands between me and you.”

“ I understand you, Mabel,” he answered, and he raised his head from her shoulder ; her fortitude had made him strong—“ I will try to bear this awful trial as bravely as I can, but I am not so brave as you are.”

“ Very brave at heart, though still an invalid,” she answered. “ Oh, let us have faith, Frank. Be sure some day, sooner perhaps than we think, God will let us marry. You will go to Germany of course,” she added timidly, “ according to the old arrangement.”

“ I think not,” he answered.

“But that arrangement must stand good,” she exclaimed, in anxious voice, “Oh, please, say you will go.”

“I can’t promise, Mabel; I can’t afford it.”

“But I—I,” she stammered, and she burst into tears, when she marked the expression on his face.

“Oh, Frank, I implore you to grant me this mercy—at least, till you are well and strong, till the work comes, Frank; nothing more.”

“No, Mabel,” and he rose with effort from his chair. “I cannot. If I lose you, I must respect myself.”

“But they will send you back to Tiflis,” she cried in a voice of agony. “Oh, Frank, not this cruelty; I suffer enough without this fearful burden. Have mercy on me.”

“Mabel,” he answered firmly; “I cannot bind myself with pledges. We must be free now—absolutely free. I must be a man, and not dependent on a woman for my living.”

In her heart she felt he was right, but she could not speak.

“I had better go,” he said, “we are only torturing one another.” She did not dare to make any rejoinder.

“Good-bye, Mabel. Thank God, although we part, we part in honour, in self-respect, in true love. I do thank God for that,” he laid his hand on hers; her hand trembled, but there was no response to the pressure of his. He turned from her; he strove to find his hat, and then his strength gave way, the physical weakness he had conquered with intense moral effort resumed its sway, he groped towards the door, and suddenly staggered back. She flew to him, and this time she caught him at the moment of falling. He was insensible, and she sank to the floor holding him in her arms. She had fought the battle bravely, but she was vanquished now.

“I will never leave you, Frank, I swear that—never,” she cried, passionately; “be it sin, be it shame—never! That accursed

will has done its work. Shame from henceforth ; but no power on earth shall separate us."

Miss Lindsay had followed Foster to Mrs. Vaughan's house ; she entered the room as Mabel was clinging to her lover.

"Hey-day," she exclaimed, "what another of these fits of exhaustion ? "

"Yes," answered Mabel, "but this time I don't leave him ; this time he remains in my house."

"Mabel!" exclaimed Miss Lindsay, breathless.

"Listen to me," and Mabel rose to her feet, with fierce determined glance. Miss Lindsay had never seen such an expression in her face before. She looked unflinchingly into Miss Lindsay's eyes. "That man is henceforth my husband, married or not—you understand me ? "

"I do," answered Miss Lindsay, regaining her self-possession.

"Then this house is no place for you," continued Mabel, in a harsh voice.

“On the contrary, it’s the very place for me,” rejoined Miss Lindsay; “and what’s more, I mean to stop. Oh, you scoundrel,” she muttered in an undertone, as she went to ring the bell, “by the Lord’s mercy, we’ll beat you yet.” And she deliberately took off her bonnet and shawl; but her heart beat violently, and a sickening feeling of apprehension weighed upon her spirits.

CHAPTER XV.

'TWAS A FAMOUS VICTORY.

IT was a relapse, and a serious one—the sitting-room, it was, in fact, the library, was converted into a bed-room, and Miss Lindsay and Betsy Brown took charge of the invalid by turns, one or the other always remaining in the room and assisting Mabel in her office of chief nurse.

A week of danger was passed, then a week of gradual convalescence. Mabel was absent from time to time on business matters. At the end of the second week, she informed Miss Lindsay that she had insured her life to the utmost possible amount, having regard to necessary income

—“so I've done all in my power for everybody, and whether I live or die it don't matter.”

“When do you think of returning to Torquay?” inquired Miss Lindsay; “you say your sister Mary is not quite so well.”

“You mean,” answered Mabel—“when do I intend to leave Frank Foster? Never!” It was a challenge to Miss Lindsay to continue the subject, but Miss Lindsay obstinately held her peace.

“You have kissed me every night,” said Mabel; “I have no right to take those kisses from you; I am not worthy of them.” Again Miss Lindsay vouchsafed no reply, she appeared to be lost in a state of abstraction.

“Isinglass,” she suddenly exclaimed; “I want two ounces; give me your keys!” she snatched up Mabel's keys and left the room. She felt dreadfully depressed, dreadfully downcast. She hurried to her own room. “That poor girl,” she murmured, “is great either for good or evil. Oh, you

cowardly beast, to attack her like this—to thrust your cruel sword into the one vulnerable point of her noble nature ; unswerving constant love. You tried to drag her down by ministering to selfish greed, that first will—by secret crime, the destruction of that accursed second will—but those temptations fell from her like water, and now you fasten your accursed fangs into the very nobleness of her character. There's something wrong somewhere. I've prayed for her myself; the 'Brazen Vessel' has asked for prayers on her behalf; I have written three special letters to Donald MacTonans. But it seems all in vain, and I feel weak and downcast when I ought to be very strong."

Miss Lindsay put on her bonnet and shawl, and for the first time since Foster's attack, she prepared to leave the house. She gave strict injunctions to Betsey Brown, on her honour, not to leave Foster's room during her absence.

"No more shilly-shally," said Miss Lindsay, addressing her spiritual antagonist as

she left the house, “ no more letter-writing; I am going straight off to Paternoster Row, and what’s more, I mean to see the editor of the ‘ Brazen Vessel ’ face to face.”

If Miss Lindsay had been accused of believing in the Grand Lama, or the Pope of Rome, or the Patriarch of Constantinople, she would have been indignant at such an imputation of superstition, or, indeed, if she had been accused of believing in any order of priesthood, Anglican or otherwise—but, nevertheless, whether in spiritual or earthly affairs, we do generally believe in some earthly power or medium, and Miss Lindsay’s faith was centered in the editor of the “ Brazen Vessel.” When you pass down Fleet Street you cannot see with the bodily eye those countless fibres of influence, which start like innumerable telegraph wires from the large newspaper offices, bearing to the length and breadth of England the pulsations of a human brain throbbing with thought, it may be, in a little gaslit room ; and far away beyond England spread those

fibres of influence to the utmost ends of the earth. This is marvel enough to merely secular minds, but to the mind of Miss Lindsay, the fibres of the "Brazen Vessel" were not only horizontal but perpendicular. They rose mysteriously from earth to heaven, and they returned to earth modifying earthly things—and insensibly and involuntarily in Miss Lindsay's mind, the editor of the "Brazen Vessel" seemed to be a being, potent with a spiritual potency, beyond all vaunted potentates of the spiritual world.

Miss Lindsay left the train at Cannon Street Station; through divers streets of narrow perplexity, she emerged into St. Paul's Churchyard. There stood St. Paul's Cathedral—grand with its façade, grander in that, if less great, than St. Peter's. "Priestcraft," muttered Miss Lindsay, scornfully, for she had long ceased to believe in its efficacy, and she hurried on to Paternoster Row in quest of the office of the "Brazen Vessel." She discovered it

with some difficulty, thanks in great measure to the help of a smudgy boy of inkstained aspect.

“Are you the lady as the guvner expects, ma’am? Up three pair, please.” The boy acted as pilot. They were narrow, worn deal stairs, littered with scraps of paper and dust but—the Scala Santa at Rome, is not more sacred to the faithful pilgrim, than were those stairs to Miss Lindsay. A feeling of deep awe crept upon her as she gathered up her petticoats for the ascent. At length she was to behold the mysterious being who had been gifted with spiritual anticipation of her approach; the right landing was reached at last; a door, the white paint of which was grimed by age, and the finger-marks of many dirty hands, was the only material obstacle between her beating heart and the sanctum of the “Brazen Vessel.”

The boy flung open the door! the room was empty. “Guvnor’s gone out for his chop—back in five minutes—safe.”

“I’ll wait,” said Miss Lindsay, speaking

with bated breath, and the boy retired to a small adjoining apartment, where he busied himself with certain occupations connected with a large paste-pot. Miss Lindsay was glad for awhile to be alone—it all seemed so mysteriously wonderful, awful beyond the awe of cathedral aisles and fretted roofs,—the little room in which she sat (and a dusty dirty little room, her eyes quickly discovered) was verily the source of a mighty power of prayer, held in the grasp of one human being—that story of St. Peter and the keys, forsooth—many a time had she laughed to scorn that assumption of priestly arrogance—and yet in the hands of this editor who had stepped out to get his chop, lay the awful power of accepting or refusing a paragraph of special prayer, upon which haply, might hang the salvation or damnation of human beings. She gazed with increased awe round the room; the outer husk of things spiritual was of no import in her eyes; the cheap, torn, dirty papering—the litter of dusty manuscripts, the old

dirty carpet trodden into holes—these things did not jar upon her feelings of deep reverence,—she looked for the inward and not the outward; the spiritual substance, and not the earthly shadow. At last her eyes chanced to fall upon divers placards. “Matter; A Journal of Mental Progress and Psychological Research.” What on earth could be the meaning of those placards?

A copy of that publication lay on the table close to where she sat; she took it up and read a few lines—

“Boy,” she cried, in agitated voice, “What's this?”

“What the guvnor edits,” replied the boy, in the midst of his pastings.

“I came to see the editor of the ‘Brazen Vessel.’”

“All right, marm, guvnor edits both.”

“What, ‘Matter’ and the ‘Brazen Vessel?’” exclaimed Miss Lindsay, in awe-stricken voice.

“Yes, marm, both!”

“Beast!” exclaimed Miss Lindsay. And

before the astonished and terrified boy could regain his self-possession, Miss Lindsay dashed out of the room, and down the deal stairs into the street. “Oh, you scoundrel! No wonder the ‘Brazen Vessel’ could not help me. This is too terrible; the clear waters are turned to mud—that mighty power of help is lost, and the channels of grace are choked by infidelity.”

Crushed in body and soul, Miss Lindsay called a cab, and drove back to Dulwich. A letter awaited her—the Glasgow postmark—there was good augury in that. She tore open the envelope and quickly scanned the contents. It was in the handwriting of Mrs. Donald MacTonans.

“Come and help us. Poor Donald!—he says you alone can save him from the snares of the evil one. I can keep the dreadful secret no longer. It all comes of those long Sabbath afternoons, shut up in the house, poor dear, with the blinds drawn down; and then just that whiskey-toddy—a wee drop—and that’s how it began. But

he preaches and prays just as beautifully as ever——”

“Oh, good Lord,” cried Miss Lindsay in despair, “all help has failed me; don’t leave me to fight this awful battle alone.” She fell on her knees and prayed fervently, and the tears fell from her eyes, and her forehead was wet with perspiration. “Oh, Lord, don’t let that scoundrel conquer me now; don’t let him tear that precious jewel from Margaret’s hands—my darling, my true, noble girl.”

But there was no light of hope in her soul, and she wept bitterly, and groaned with the deep anguish of her loving heart. At length, all of a moment, she started to her feet, her face suddenly became radiant with faith and triumph.

“Oh, you scoundrel! the Lord has given us the victory. I tell you, His hand-maiden is saved! This is the Lord’s doing, and it is very wonderful. You’ll never guess our path to victory, because you only know the mean and contemptible ways of human

nature. The Lord will save her through the greatness and nobleness of her heart and soul."

Miss Lindsay descended to the drawing-room. As she approached, she heard loud voices, Mrs. Corley's voice and Mabel's. She entered the room. Mr. and Mrs. Corley were engaged in an excited conversation with Mabel. Miss Lindsay sat down in a chair, assuming her usual rigid attitude.

"Well, ma'am," said Mrs. Corley, turning abruptly to her, and speaking with a flushed face, "it's a good thing you have come, but I doubt whether you will remain long. Mrs. Vaughan has dared to throw off the mask at last. We came to expostulate with her upon Mr. Foster's remaining here in my late brother's house—a matter of scandal and shame to us and the whole neighbourhood—and Mrs. Vaughan has the fearful effrontery to tell us to our faces that she means this man to remain here with her to their lives' end—his mistress, and not his wife."

Miss Lindsay sat rigidly still, staring straight before her into vacant space.

"Did you hear what I've said, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Corley, becoming exasperated by Miss Lindsay's manner.

"I heard," answered Miss Lindsay.

"Then I presume, ma'am," continued Mrs. Corley almost breathless with excitement, "that a proper regard for your own character and reputation, will cause you to leave this house of open shame forthwith."

Miss Lindsay vouchsafed no reply.

"You, a woman of piety—of religion; a distributor of tracts; a reader at mothers' meetings; a worker at Dorcas societies"—Mrs. Corley revelled in her triumph over Miss Lindsay—"and you remain here and abet this woman in her course of sin and shame! Come, Corley, I will not, as a Christian wife and mother, endure these insults any longer."

"One word before you do go," exclaimed Miss Lindsay, "and don't forget it. If I were on my oath in a court of justice, and

if Betsey Brown were on her oath, we two should swear that one or the other of us has never left Mr. Foster's room ever since he was seized with illness in this house. I repeat, when you tell your cruel story, which you will be only too glad to tell, out of pure malice, don't forget to tell that bit of truth along with it."

"Anything more?" inquired Mrs. Corley, almost breathless with indignation.

"Yes, this tract, 'London Cream, or Hope for the Best,'" and Miss Lindsay rose from her chair, and with her peculiar knack forced the tract into Mrs. Corley's unwilling hand; she then immediately resumed her seat and gazed into vacancy.

"Come, Corley, this is no place for your wedded wife," and Mrs. Corley flung herself with indignation out of the room, followed by her husband.

There was silence for a while. At length Mabel spoke in a firm, determined voice.

"Mrs. Corley's account of what I said to her was quite true, and what she said to

you was quite true also—you must leave me; your character will be lost if you remain here. The whole world will turn away; you must leave me. I insist upon it."

Again there was a long pause, and at last Miss Lindsay turned to Mabel and addressed her, gazing full in her face.

"Do you think if the whole world—if all the good people, and all the respectable people, and all the religious people stood howling at me, with the devil and all his angels behind them, it would make one iota of difference in my conduct? This world of time, big as it is, is a very small thing in my eyes, and it will quickly pass away, with its falseness and its lies. Leave you? That means defeat! Did any of my family ever turn their backs on the enemy, on fire, and sword, and death? My blessed ones fought their fight in India—my grandfather, my dear father, my Uncle Harry, and my darling Bob; shall I play the coward here in England, and then dare

to meet them, as I shall meet them, in that world which never ends? Leave you here in the very heat of the fight? What answer shall I make to my Lord when He asks me: 'Where is she, Margaret?' Shall I answer, 'I don't know, good Lord; the good people left her, and the respectable people, and the religious people, and then I left her.' And my Lord would say: 'But I never told you to leave her, Margaret. I told you to stand by her side, and fight for her through a great and fierce battle; and then my Lord would look on me as he looked on poor shivering Peter that awful night at the fireside. I tell you for all the joy of Heaven or the pain of Hell, I would not behold that look on my Lord's face—that look of infinite pity, mingled with sorrowful contempt.'

"So remember, Mabel, I shall never leave you; be it for sin or shame, I shall stand at your side and fight for you, and maybe, by the Lord's mercy, I shall save you in the end. Come what may, you will

always be my darling, my dear girl; when you want help, my arms will be folded round your neck, and my kiss will be upon your lips, and in my little home you will ever be a welcome guest. You understand me; you know you can trust Margaret Lindsay's word."

"But I've told those cruel people," faltered Mabel! "they know it now."

"You have a daring nature, Mabel, a grand defiant nature. You could meet shame face to face in talking to them—I knew you could do that; but I defy you to do this," Miss Lindsay rose from her chair, and her voice rang out with clear fervent utterance: "I defy you to go to the man you love, to the man who reverences you, and worships you, and regards you as his bright peculiar star of womanhood—his great and precious gift from the hand of God—I defy you to say to him, I will be your mistress, Frank; take me, not in honour, but in degradation and shame; no longer a woman to honour

and revere—the grand thoughts, and the noble and holy thoughts shattered for ever—a woman who has fallen, and you also must fall to be worthy of her degradation. Aye, Mabel, you could endure the contempt of the whole world—but I say, I defy you to endure the contempt of the man you love, and honour, and revere; every kiss a seal of sin and shame, an intolerable agony.” Miss Lindsay spoke these final words, standing erect with her head upraised, and a radiance, almost more than human, filled her countenance. When she looked down, Mabel lay sobbing at her feet.

And then Miss Lindsay bent to the ground, and falling on her knees raised Mabel in her arms, and kissed her.

“My darling, my daughter—my God-daughter in the right of this terrible baptism. Let us bless Him for this great deliverance, and above all things,” she whispered gently in Mabel’s ear, “when you remember the pain of this dark hour,

recollect that if this gift of love, which He has given you, has been a source of sorrow, and tribulation, and sore perplexity, its very greatness and nobleness have been the means of your salvation, saving both you and him from sin and shame, and making you both honourable and true and noble in His sight, and also in the sight of men."

CHAPTER XVI.

SAINTSHIP—SMALL 8VO., CLOTH, GILT EDGES.

MABEL returned to Torquay after an absence in all of little more than a fortnight from the day of the discovery of the new will.

“I am so glad you were able to return to-day, I thought my last letter would bring you back,” exclaimed Mrs. Smith, as she eagerly met her daughter in the hall. “Poor Mary has been much weaker, and one day quite alarmed us; she pined so to see you. I hope all that dreadful law business in London is settled at last.”

“Everything is settled, mother,” answered Mabel; “I have nothing to do now except to help you to nurse and comfort Mary.”

The pale face of the invalid lighted up as soon as Mabel entered her room.

“Darling, precious Mabel,” she exclaimed gleefully, though in a very weak voice, “so you have come back to us again.” Mabel kissed her sister and burst into tears.

“Don’t grieve for me, dear,” said Mary earnestly; “Mother frets herself, and thinks I am worse than I really am, but I shall soon be better, now that you have come back. I hope those carnal things won’t trouble you any more.”

“Everything is in Mr. Barton’s hands,” answered Mabel.

“I trust that Mrs. Corley and the rest were kind to you,” continued Mary; “poor dear, I dare say you have been dreadfully worried, but you will be quiet and happy with us now, won’t you darling?”

“Oh yes,” responded Mabel, “I shall try to be very happy.”

“Be sure I shall pray very earnestly that the true happiness and the true peace, may be vouchsafed to you abundantly.”

“Yes, yes, Mary,” exclaimed Mabel in words of heartfelt emphasis, “pray for that—pray for that!”

“At the same time,” continued Mary, and although she was very weak, she felt it was incumbent upon her to make the effort, “when we ask for fresh blessings, we must not forget to be thankful for the many blessings we possess. I have a poor weak suffering body, and yet I do not repine. I have long since been mercifully enabled to discover its deep blessing; but you, dear Mabel, with your good health and strength, you can never tell the temptations and trials which beset me, until I was permitted to convert those trials into blessings. Your spiritual path has been wonderfully easy; I might have doubted, I might have rebelled, but I fought and conquered, by the Lord’s mercy. Heaven be thanked that you have been spared combats of this hard nature. I don’t speak in any boastful spirit—God forbid—I only allude to these things for your example; hitherto your trials have

been rather after the flesh than the spirit—that early love-folly, for instance; thousands of foolish boys and girls have gone through the same thing. But that is all past and gone, thank Heaven. Oh, Mabel, the trials of the spirit are the hard things to bear, and you have been spared all that—just alter the pillow a little, dear. Your arm is so firm and strong, Mabel, it is such a comfort to me. I can see by your face that you have been a great deal worried, darling—but these wordly matters are nothing in comparison with heavenly trials."

Mr. and Mrs. Smith were both in the room, and their eyes were filled with tears, as they listened to Mary's earnest words, and Mary with her pale suffering face looked like a saint in some modern picture, noteworthy for sweet popular sentiment, rather than technical power; but they none of them knew that Mabel, who lay weeping at the foot of her sister's bed, had fought a great fight and won a great victory, in the

light of which the spiritual triumphs of Mary paled away into insignificance—that her self-sacrifice was the source of all the material blessings and comforts that they enjoyed. Mr. Simeon was of course equally ignorant of the fact that the frequent dinners of inward comfort, and the nice hot suppers, and the well-matured old bottled port, and the genuine old Irish whiskey, were all owing to the supreme devotedness of a woman, who, in his eyes, was still unfortunately, notwithstanding many estimable Christian qualities, in a state of unregeneration. Mabel never opened her lips on the subject of her trial; in the first place, it would only have been an occasion of painful sorrow to Mary in her weak state, and secondly, though they loved her dearly, very dearly be it said—she knew that they would be unable to afford her any sympathy or comfort; that the story of her love would only be a wonder, or at most a perplexing worry to them all.

So Mabel lived on with her sacred grief;

but if there was great tribulation, there was also a sense of triumph in her soul, the man she loved would ever regard her with reverence and honour ; and although there were silent hours of bitter agony, and deep longings for love and sympathy, still she rose up the greater for these hours of depression, and Mary marvelled at her devoted care and overflowing affection, and others too, suffering members of Mr. Simeon's flock, experienced the blessing of Mabel's devotion and self-denial.

“ Dear Mabel,” Mary would sometimes say in gentle half-chiding voice, and with tears in her eyes, “ you think so much about others, I want you to think a little more about yourself and your own soul. ‘ If a man gain the whole world and lose his own soul.’ Think of those words, dearest, and then examine yourself carefully, as to whether you are not forgetting your own soul, in thinking so much about others. Your *own* salvation should be your chief thought and care. Thank Heaven, I was

mercifully led years ago to the knowledge of this blessed truth, and it has been an exceeding comfort to me in all ways, carnal and spiritual. Oh, Mabel, it is your own cross you must try to bear."

Mr. Simeon thoroughly endorsed all Mary's sayings on this subject, and carefully noted them down in his memorandum book; he had in fact made considerable progress with Mary's biography. Mary lingered on, a hopeless invalid, for some three years, but without great pain; she was very resigned and happy, and she looked forward eagerly for release from all earthly weariness and toil. "I trust my poor sinful wicked life may not have been in vain," she would sometimes say; "I trust that my trials and temptations may be a warning and example to many." And lying in Mabel's arms, she would bless her for all her love and unwearied attention, and she would very frequently, although the effort was almost too much for her, pray for Mabel, that at last she might be converted,

and saved with the remnant of the true Israel.

As the hour of death drew nigh, all her thoughts seemed centred upon this one idea of Mabel's salvation. At the last hour they were gathered at her bedside, her parents and Mr. Simeon. Mabel raised the dying girl in her arms; they listened eagerly for some sweet consoling utterance as to her faith, her sure hope of salvation; in their deep anxiety, they questioned her about her *own* faith, her *own* soul; they asked her for some sign of her belief. But her ears were dull, and in the dying weakness of her brain, theology had lost its force and meaning, and her heart, in that supreme hour, was absorbed by one thought, love for the sister whose love for her, though she knew it not, had been the great love of self-sacrifice; and when, in painful anxiety, they pressed her with their questions, "did she believe?" "had she really a saving faith?" she murmured very faintly, "Mabel, darling Mabel. Oh Lord, save my precious Mabel,"

and her head sank back gently, and she died in Mabel's arms.

Mr. Simeon wrote the story of Mary's life in a very sweet and touching manner, his quotations from Scripture were very aptly chosen, but her last words troubled him greatly. He had anxiously looked for some dying assurance of her faith, but most unfortunately, notwithstanding her religious life, she had in the end only given evidence of a loving heart. Nevertheless he elected to stand by the truth, and merely add a few paragraphs by way of explanation and apology. Mr. Hard, however, absolutely demurred to this termination of the narrative.

"It's the real fact," protested Mr. Simeon, with tears in his eyes.

"Bless the man," exclaimed Mr. Hard with peevish irritation,—"who the deuce wants facts? We want books that will pay; I tell you, we must have a dying assurance of faith, or the book isn't worth

publishing. Don't bother yourself; I know what's what; leave it to me." And Mr. Hard with great deftness placed the required profession in the mouth of the dying girl. The book was an undoubted success—and the greatest stress was laid by the religious reviewers upon the dying words of Mary as recorded in the book; those words, they declared, were manifestly seals of edification. When Mr. Hard met Mr. Simeon shortly after publication upon the question of a second edition, he had his triumph. " Didn't I tell you that the book wouldn't have been worth twopence, if the death scene had stood as you wrote it? I've made that book into a small fortune; it's a sure card with middle-class Christians of limited means and subjective faith."

" Still it was the truth," said Mr. Simeon meekly and also regretfully.

" Bless the man. Here's your cheque," exclaimed Mr. Hard briskly. " Deuce a bit! don't that content you? "

Nevertheless Mr. Simeon thought (he did not venture to say so) that the truth would have been best, of course with clear explanations and a judicious apology addressed to the reader.

CONCLUSION.

MISS LINDSAY FIRES A PARTING SHOT.

SOME six years had come and passed, since the day that Mabel parted from Frank Foster, when one day in mid-autumn a letter arrived in Glasgow addressed to Miss Lindsay ; it bore a Swiss post-mark. Miss Lindsay eagerly tore open the envelope. The letter was from Mabel written from the Eggishorn Hotel. " You darling, we are just married ; until we were really married, I would not write to you. This is how it came about. That railway under Piccadilly had shaken the foundations of St. Ronald's, a large sum of money was required for underpinning. Mr. Barton pressed his point, and they

have given an annuity for the joint lives of my father and mother. I wrote to Frank to say I could marry him. Oh, you darling, we are so happy, Frank is making fair though slow progress in his profession, he works so hard, dear boy. That cruel will took away every penny I derived in any way from the property, but if need be, I can return for awhile to my old teaching, and in any event we have both resolved never to touch one penny of that man's property; but oh, we are so happy; we could not resist the extravagance of this little tour. Such a scene before my eyes, it seems as if one can see more of the wonderful ways of the Almighty in this mountain-land than in England. We sit together and gaze upon the glorious sunsets, and when we watch the crimson flush upon the mountain tops dying into the cold dead desolation of twilight, I remember with sadness the bright hopes that died away in despair; and then I cling to him in an agony of apprehension, till I call to mind

that this bright crimson, which crept up the mountain sides and died on the topmost peaks, will again light those peaks, and spread downwards like a rich mantle, until it dies away in the bright light of the perfect day."

Miss Lindsay's answer was written from Glasgow, now her permanent home; it was full of exultation and large love.

" Your letter has filled my heart with joy and brightness and faith; help of that kind is very precious. He and I are hard at it; he gives me no peace; he fights me with that toddy, and cant, and hollow religious profession, and dirt, and squalor; if it were not for the toddy and the cant, I think I should hold my own better. I was just in time to save poor Donald; I made him take the pledge. He preaches and prays just as well as ever, some people say; but I've a quick ear, and I don't catch the ring of the man in the big words; but still he's saved, though I always dread those Sabbath afternoons, and those dreadful blinds with cant

behind them. Alas, I don't always win the victory—he often beats me with his old dodge of hollow religious profession—and sometimes I feel very downhearted and weary; and I can't get about as quickly as I used, owing to the rheumatism, and that worries me a great deal. Sometimes I find myself asking, 'Oh, Lord, how much longer, for I'm very tired, and he's never weary of doing mischief?' And then just when I am at my worst, the Lord is very gracious, and sends me great comfort. He knows I'm only a plain matter-of-fact woman; that I should not understand white raiment, and wings, and golden crowns, so in His great mercy He sends Bob to help me in a sort of vision. Oh, but so real, just as Bob used to be in the old school days at Edinburgh, his coat torn, and his face smudged all over with dust and blood; but his voice always bright and cheery, 'That's your sort, old girl'—it was sometimes 'old girl,' and sometimes 'little Madge'—'straight out from the shoulder; drop it into 'em; never

say die.' And when I see that blessed vision, I always wake up refreshed with a good stout heart, and that scoundrel knows it. But, nevertheless, I should like to meet him face to face, for it's poor work always fighting in the dark, and one has to hit out all round, and there's no end to his dodging. But I know I never shall see him, till he and I meet before the Great White Throne, and then I shall stand at Bob's side and behold him grovelling at our feet. And I shall say to my Lord, 'I was only a poor weak woman, and he was a great prince, but in Thy strength, Oh, Lord, I was very strong, and in the mighty power of Thy love, many a time have I conquered him; and against his lies, and the lies he taught the world, and against cant, and hypocrisy, and soft false words, and lying phrases, I stood face foremost—and, as my godfather and godmothers vowed for me in my baptism (my godfather lost an arm at Trafalgar; he was a stout Christian to the backbone, though he swore to the last,

as sailors will); I fought that scoundrel to my life's end—under Christ's banner, against sin, the world, and the *devil*. Amen."

II.

ENNOBLED BY LOVE.

(VITTORIA CONTARINI)

This story is adapted from a play of the same title. In order to secure the dramatic rights of the author, the play, prior to the publication of the story in the Temple Bar Magazine, was published by Messrs. Richard Bentley and Son, New Burlington Street, W.

VITTORIA CONTARINI;

OR,

LOVE THE TRAITOR.

PROLOGUE.

THE MANAGER'S SANCTUM.

“WE must do it cheap this time. I don’t want a lot of carpenter’s work, and a heavy bill for scenery—none of your speculative outlays, big ‘sets’ and an army of ‘supers;’ just try to eke out some of the old canvas with a new idea or two. What did I say? New ideas? Deuce a bit—new ideas and a stall audience, that won’t pay! mean old ideas touched up with fresh varnish—that’s the only safe thing in the

way of novelty—a play full of new ideas would be bankruptcy for your humble servant. We've been pretty well the round of every sort of play—opera, farce, opera bouffe, and burlesque; so we'll just try back on the romantic by way of a change. To start with, I've got a thoroughly good moon, works on a new principle, sure burner, and warranted not to wobble; there's a new fleecy hosiery sky—flakes of cotton wool—it's a patent!—and a lunar rainbow, only that part of the machine comes expensive on account of chemicals, so leave out the rainbow.

“Come—a good moon is half a plot any day—just take a note of the scenery and properties as I go on. Number one, ‘Moon;’ I said ‘romantic’—well, of course that means Italy. I picked up a cheap lot of rubbishy imitation sixteenth-century Italian chairs in Wardour Street—deuced uncomfortable they are, too—seats and backs all wood; we'll whip on a little copper leaf and a dash or two of varnish—bless you, it will stamp the scene with antiquarian

research, and that's everything nowadays. It shows culture, and a knowledge of South Kensington, in the manager, and the critics like it because it enables them to show culture in themselves, and gives them an extra paragraph for their critiques. Write down six antique chairs—if you want more you must use the old stock lot, white and gold with emerald green satin.

“Anachronisms, hey? I can’t help that—it’s an author’s business to dodge anachronisms—I can give you an old carved shrine with a little swing brass lamp, all complete, and a nice rosewood ‘prie-dieu’ chair, covered with modern ecclesiastical needlework; it’s been a good deal used, and got rather creaky, but the glue pot will settle that. Then there’s a splendid bit of tapestry—I picked it up in Paris—the worship of the golden calf—you might get some sparkling allusions out of that subject—modern mammon-worship, you know. I forgot, though—this is a romantic play—we must keep satire for comedy.

“Now for our scene; let me consider—I

don't think we've anything in stock that could be vamped up. We have settled upon Italy—haven't we? There's a good Palazzo interior they've been using somewhere in the provinces, I won't mention where, till the people won't stand it any longer—do for Rome or Naples, or what you like—it's going cheap—we will have that. Rather old, you say? Confound you authors, always wanting new scenes; people don't always live in new houses, do they? Stick to nature, can't you? All art ought to be founded on nature. By the way, take care to study the scene before you begin to write the play. I declare to you, as a solemn fact, I once had an author who wrote his play before seeing his scene—confound it, sir—we had had all our rehearsals, and when the scene arrived in the theatre at the last moment, on the very evening of the performance, we were never able to use the real door—a splendid big door it was, too; we had to keep it permanently shut, and cut a false door through the papering. I

didn't give that author a second commission, I can tell you.

“ Talking of false doors, that reminds me ; take care you get a sliding panel into your plot ; sliding panels have been too much neglected of late. I have an unbounded faith in sliding panels. I've seen an audience, utterly incapable of understanding the simplest plot, entirely absorbed by a sliding panel ; in fact, they never looked at the actors at all ; their eyes were always fixed on the panel, and that panel was the making of the play.

“ Come, don't grumble at the scene. I'm going to give you a splendid 'back cloth ;' for the matter of that, two—the same subject, daylight and moonlight—they were painted for a diorama ; it's a view of Santa Maria della something—it's got a big dome, don't you know ? I'll swear I've never been at an exhibition in all my life, oil or water, but I've seen a picture of that Santa something—persons of culture know it as well as they know St. Martin's Church, and

those are the people who frequent my theatre."

" You're quite right, the church is at Venice. Well, then, that fixes Venice for our locality. Never been to Venice ! What's that matter ? You can get it all out of Murray and Baedeker, can't you ? Besides, a man always writes with greater freedom about a subject of which he's entirely ignorant ; bless you, that's how the best critiques are written. Man alive, never make difficulties if you want to be a dramatic author. Here's our scene, then. ' Magnificent but dilapidated chamber in the Palazzo something, with a distant view of the church of Santa something ; ' sounds well for a bill, don't it ? Egad, my boy, Venice, and a patent moon ! I've half written the play for you !

" What's that ? Venice worked out ! Pooh, nothing's worked out if you've got brains to work in ; it's what you put into a subject, not what you get out of it. Come, I think we've settled everything ; let's have

a glass of sherry. The company, hey? I leave you to fit the company; that's your business, not mine. All I know is, if you don't fit 'em as tight as wax, your play won't come to the boards. Gad, sir, when it comes to the rub, the manager daren't open his mouth if he's got a first-rate company. Leading lady? You'd better ask her what sort of character she would like; it's all one to me, provided it's a good one for the public; as to our leading gentleman, I say ditto. Bless you, give 'em what they like, and plenty of it; it's the easiest method of writing a play, both for author and manager.

“One caution, though: don't make the dresses expensive; leading ladies ruin managers in dresses whenever they get a chance—I believe they do it out of spite—chintz and muslin, if you can. Wouldn't do for Venice, hey?—rich brocaded silks! Egad, if it wasn't for those views of Santa something, which I bought cheap, I'd throw Venice over, that I would!

“ Do I object to history ? Well, I don’t hold to it as a rule ; educated people don’t care for history ; but, mind you, anything does, if you’ve got a strong plot—people only care to think about what amuses them, and the history goes for nothing. That reminds me, if you treat Venice, you must have a conspiracy—people always look for a conspiracy in Venice—they wouldn’t be content without one ; it’s the regular Venetian thing, just like that crinkly glass.

“ You don’t think there was a conspiracy during the period you propose treating ? Confound it, sir, you must make a conspiracy ! It’s no use arguing ; a conspiracy I mean to have, and that’s flat ! Don’t talk to me about historical accuracy—it’s the recognized canon of dramatic composition, that you are at liberty to twist history round your fingers. All the best critics say so, and they must know. I assert that a dramatic author is no more bound to stick to the recognized lines of history, than a landscape painter is bound to paint a view with

topographical accuracy. History is the slave of fiction, and the grovelling slave of the drama.

“ What do I mean by ‘romantic’ ? Hang it all, I thought everyone understood the meaning of that word ! Why, it’s—let me see—why, it’s something with lots of intense interest, but not too strong in the mouth. Something which titillates the sensibilities, but don’t harrow them. Look you, our people stroll into the stalls after a thoroughly good dinner ; they require the excitement of just so much mental activity as may promote and assist digestion ; they don’t want all the blood forced to the head by tragic intensity—dyspepsia, you know. There, that’s the meaning of the word ‘romantic’ ! Now go and do it, there’s a good fellow, and as quick as you can, for we are deuced hard up for novelty.

“ Just one caution about the heroine. For Heaven’s sake, none of your psychology, and mental analysis, and stuff o’ nonsense—that sort of thing is only fit for a

French audience—you must stick to a good, plain-sailing, flesh and blood kind of heroine, the style of girl other girls would like to be; awfully good, of course, and take care to pile on lots of mild agonies—the more, the better. That's your sort of heroine, if you want a play to pay. As for your hero, make him deuced bad to begin with—interesting, of course—bad and interesting—that's a sure card! Women are always fascinated by bad and interesting men. And then, at the end, make him good through the influence of the heroine. Women like that notion so much; it ministers so pleasantly to their sweet pride and vanity, bless 'em. A reformed rake, don't you know; something in the Charles Surface style.

“ Not particularly original, do you say? Of course it isn't; I don't require you to tell me that. Confound it, sir, didn't I tell you at first starting that I entirely decline being ruined by an original play? If you insist upon being original, you may look out for another manager. Come, we've had

talk enough to understand one another, and there's a dozen people waiting for me. Help yourself to that sherry, and I'll run through your notes meantime.

“Number one, ‘A patent moon.’ I shall have to get a new man, that’s clear; old Jones isn’t steady enough. Number two, ‘Six Venetian chairs’—culture! just a light coat of varnish. Number three, ‘Shrine, with lamp to ditto’—relacquered, I think. Number four, ‘Prie-dieu chair’—glue! Number five, ‘Old tapestry.’ We’ll hang the golden calf before the panel, not that the one is relevant to the other, but it will catch the eye better there than anywhere else. Number six, ‘Sliding panel!’ If that works easy, the play’s as good as made. Number seven, ‘Palazzo interior, Venice;’ we’ll dodge it up a bit to look like one of Fortuny’s pictures—splash and dash, you know. By the way, couldn’t you manage to introduce one of those withered old lackeys of his, in a big faded livery?—an old livery wouldn’t ruin me. I’ll just add

‘lackey with livery out at elbows.’ You’ll be able to work in the lackey, never fear. Number eight, ‘Back cloth—Santa Maria della Salute.’ Gad, ‘Salute’ was the name, sure enough! By Jove, a first-rate moon, with real cotton wool clouds; you wouldn’t know ‘em from nature when the limelight’s on, and Santa Maria della Salute! What a chance for an author! If you don’t mind passing that sherry, I’ll take a glass myself. You’re in luck’s way, my boy, if ever an author was. Number nine, ‘Conspiracy.’ Ah! about something or the other, I don’t care what, as long as we get a conspiracy. Number ten, ‘Heroine, milk and water, with mild agonies.’ No, hang it, you haven’t quite hit my meaning—fire and water, if you like; lots of passion. Number eleven, ‘Hero, bad, but capable of improvement.’ Good! set to work at once. One moment, though: have we chanced to miss any of the romantic stock business? Let’s be careful. Yes, by Jove, we’ve forgotten the monk—a monk we must have! Franciscan

monk, brown serge, don't you know?—white knotted girdle and beads complete; cowl, of course—he must use his cowl; the *raison d'être* of a monk is his cowl. Oh, you'll manage it; a monk's easy enough for any man with one spark of imagination.

“Well, good-bye. This day week to read the play! Too soon, hey? Why, bless the man, the play's as good as written. I've given you the plot and characters, it only wants the dialogue. I could knock it off myself, if I wasn't so worried by my leading people. A first-rate company, you know. Confound it, there's no contenting them any way. Bless you, don't bother about poetry and figures of speech; I'll warrant my public won't look for metaphors if you give 'em a monk, and a moon, and a sliding panel. Come, we'll say this day fortnight—sharp, mind. There's one thing: remember I'm only a manager, not an actor, so you won't be obliged to fit me with a character. It will make your writing all the easier. *Au revoir!*”

CHAPTER I.

THE HEROINE.

FAR away from London, as far as Venice ; and still farther away from London life, as far as that life regards young ladyhood—in a word, far away from the life of Rotten Row, and Prince's, picnics, balls, and Ascot ; far away from the assured and comfortable life of constitutional freedom and social security, to a life heroic, to the life of a young lady who potentially could have ridden, danced, flirted, and trifled with existence as thoroughly and as earnestly, as the brightest and lightest hearted girl of the London season, but who actually lived day by day amid anxious fears and

large absorbing hopes, with hourly chances of domiciliary visits by alien police agents, with every chance of a prison, and ruin, and exile, if not for herself, at least for those she loved,—aye, and a very reasonable chance of death as a climax—but still, I repeat, potentially the very same girl as the young lady of London fashion—for girls are girls all the world over, whether the blood flows lazily in the easy levels of existence, or boils and dashes with the violent palpitations of hope and fear—a stagnant stream of the lowlands, or the bright sparkling highland torrent.

Not very far down the stream of time to the days in which our heroine lived. The year of her birth was the year in which the present Pope, Cardinal Mastai Ferretti, ascended the chair of St. Peter with the promise of liberty and constitutional reform; and the heart of the mother who bore her, had beaten with the hope of Italian freedom and redemption. Her young ears had heard the popular acclamation with

which the Austrian had been driven from Venice, and Daniel Manin chosen Dictator of the new Republic, and the booming of the cannon of that siege which, after a heroic resistance, once more subjected Venice to the Austrian rule. During the siege, her mother died in giving birth to a son; and so it fell, that young as she was, she insensibly assumed the love and care of a mother to this young brother; and time, which in due course increased her ability, also added to the strength of her devotion.

With regard to social position, Vittoria Contarini, as her name denotes, was the daughter of a great patrician family. She dwelt in an old palazzo, whereof the glories of Sansovino had indeed been embellished by the hand of time; but with regard to things of less endurance than stone and marble, time had worn away the rich gilding, and faded the splendid hangings; and rubbed them threadbare. Still it was a poverty of grandeur and not of mean-

ness—the poverty of nobles, and not of beggars.

Grand pictures had once adorned the walls of the Palazzo, but those pictures of the Venetian school, in which the colours must have been ground with essence of gold, had one by one been surrendered to picture-dealers, and connoisseurs with purses filled by commerce, and directors of foreign galleries ; and so, in days of sore need, Titian and Paul Veronese had returned a hundredfold the liberality of their patrons. But the type of the golden-haired women of old Venetian art dwelt in our heroine. A splendid framing of flesh and blood ; she might have sat to Bonifazio for those women of his *capo d'opera*, “the feast of the wicked rich man.”

Had she lived in England, she would in all probability have been educated by a loving mother for the purpose of eventual marriage. Her early life would have been passed in a well-regulated nursery ; things on the whole being made very smooth and

pleasant—ponies, and carriage drives, and fresh wholesome country life; anon, the shadow of the school-room, with careful governesses and eminent professors. Church of England principles duly instilled, but at the same time duly diluted with prudent worldliness—earth first, with heaven *en attendant*. An early life passed in contact with people of worth, and trust, and honourable sentiment, and gentle culture; and as a result of all this pleasant experience, a conviction, growing into an ambition, that it would be very advantageous to repeat in her own person the life of her own mother; to be loved some day by some pleasant young man of due rank and fortune; to live pleasantly and lovingly all the days of her life. Marriage the crowning ambition, and leading thither by pleasant steps, the delight of a first season, presentation at Court, and the fifty bright things which glitter before the eyes of a well-born English girl on her entrance into womanhood.

But our heroine lived at Venice under Austrian rule; her nurse was a spy in Austrian pay, her governess was a spy in Austrian pay, the servants round her were all more or less spies, for her father was a man suspected by the authorities of the empire, and the authorities of the empire had a firm belief, that a ludicrously niggling inspection of household life in Venice would hold Venetia safe and sound for the Austrian crown. So our heroine was early schooled in caution and subtlety by her father, and she quickly learned the art of suppressing emotion and feeling.

The governess was a woman of accomplishment, and, scholastically, she taught her pupil faithfully—earning her wages honestly as well for tuition as for police duties. With regard to moral culture, and those branches of education which involve sentiment, she very justly suspected that her quiet, calm, self-contained pupil thoroughly despised her, and being a woman of good sense, she did not waste her own time and

that of her pupil on those subjects. Our heroine learned her lessons of that nature from her father, in a little room with thick walls and double doors.

History was not a quiet school lesson—a collection of useful dates, and a *précis* for a copybook—but a thing of passion and agony, and tears, and hope; and the girl's heart heaved, and the grand eyes filled with tears, or flashed with anger and indignation, as the story of Italy and the German, and Italy and the Pope, was spread out before her, and the story of that last siege, when her mother died, was poured into her ears by her father, who had himself fought the guns in that fort of Malghera which had for so many months shielded the life of Daniel Manin's republic; but she learned, nevertheless, to pass out of the double doors with a calm and self-possessed countenance, and she was perfectly prepared to receive a music-lesson from her governess, the spy.

So as a young girl, her hopes were not

social but political—not the pleasures of a first season, but the freedom of Venice; and that other hope of eventually loving some pleasant young man of due rank and fortune, and living pleasantly and lovingly all the days of her life—this hope was also denied to our heroine. Years previously the question of marriage had been definitely settled for her by her father—she was destined in due course to marry a man of noble family more than twice her own age. It was a destiny, the common destiny of Italian girls of her own rank, and she accepted it as the heiress of Belmont accepted the ordeal of the caskets; but it was not a subject of happiness. She respected and even admired her betrothed, but she did not love him. Her marriage would indeed have taken place some few years before the commencement of our story, but for the intervention of political obstacles. Her betrothed was a man persecuted by the authorities, leading a hunted life, with spies and police agents on his track, but doubling

upon them and outwitting them with the cunning of a fox. Count Grimani was the head in Venice of that secret national society, which Austria and domestic tyranny had begotten; a man of intellect and power; a man worthy of being a member of a great political assembly. It is difficult for us here in England to release the idea. To draw a picture of such things by analogy would be to draw a caricature. It is impossible to think seriously of certain eminent English citizens playing at hide-and-seek with Scotland Yard in false hair and unseemly costumes, instead of being members of the English Parliament; but such things *were* grim facts, and not jokes, a few short years ago in Italy.

The question of marriage not being a question of love between our heroine and her betrothed, she was perfectly free to differ from him in feeling and sentiment, there being no danger that the family compact would thereby be destroyed; and upon two points, as far as the nobility of her

character was concerned, it was fortunate that her antipathy created a difference of feeling. He hated the priests as siding with the enemies of Italian freedom ; and, identifying their faith with their politics, he hated and despised both. But the heart of a woman cannot live wholly upon hatred. Our heroine loved her brother with devoted affection ; but that was not enough. Her father's love was greater towards her brother, as being the last male descendant of his house, than towards herself. She wanted a large love and sympathy ; she hated the priest as bitterly as her betrothed, but hatred was not consolation. She could discover no balm of comfort in pure materialism ; but the idea of a divine woman, to whom she could pour forth her wants and prayers, was too blessed and comforting a thought for the lonely heart of a motherless girl to reject and despise ; and seeming, as it did, that during her course of life she was never likely to meet with a full measure of love and sympathy, she clung with the greater

fervour to this source of consolation and support. Thus, through the heart, the priest well-nigh regained what as a politician he had lost. Nor did she forget that Arnold of Brescia, and Savonarola, and their own Father Sarpi, had been patriots as well as priests.

The other point wherein she ventured to differ from her betrothed was the doctrine of the dagger. It is true she scarcely dared to avow her difference. Despair has driven many a noble nature to accept the doctrine of tyrannicide as the last weapon of hopeless oppression, but Vittoria, with true instinct, held to a great idea of Venice one day winning freedom by open combat and untarnished victory. She prayed fervently in her enthusiastic girlish heart, that if men's fingers must press the trigger, she might at least bite the cartridge, and load the musket, and stand at the post of danger. She knew how to mould a cartridge—she had learned it from her brother; she could do it as deftly as she could mould a ciga-

rette for her father, or with cleanest of white hands play a valse of Chopin to her governess, who was justly proud of her pupil's brilliant execution.

Thus there were two hopes which in Vittoria's heart replaced the English girl's hope of the first season and marriage—the freedom of Venice, and knowing that, life permitting, marriage would be the result of that day's triumph; the hope that death might somehow or the other befall her in the combat. So, with her beauty veiled by the black mantilla, and shrinking with scornful disdain from the Austrian in the piazza, for those two things she prayed under the golden dome of St. Mark, with eyes raised to those figures of Christ and the Apostles, awful in the gaunt majesty of Byzantine art, but harmonizing in their sternness with the dark sadness of her prayers.

To one prayer it seemed at last that an answer was to be vouchsafed. The peace of Villafranca between the French and the Austrian emperors had been a cruel blow to

Venetian hope; but once more chances were astir—German was marshalled against German; Prussia had joined Italy against Austria, the army of Italy had crossed the Mincio; Garibaldi and his volunteers were up and doing among the northern mountains, and the national society of Venice was on the *qui vive* to second, if possible, by some popular rising, the efforts of Victor Emmanuel and of the Italian nation to free Venice and create an united Italy.

CHAPTER II.

THE CHALLENGE.

PIETRO was major domo in the Palazzo Contarini, and he was a good deal more than that; in fact, he performed in his own person all the offices which in an opulent and aristocratic household are performed by a large company of men-servants. In the better days many were the male attendants who ministered to the wants and splendour of the Contarini family—large the wages and perquisites, and large and splendid the men who enjoyed them. Pietro was old and wizened, and of shuffling gait; and old and tarnished and misfitting was the livery he wore. He was, in fact, wearing

out the old liveries in succession—he had worn out several, but there were liveries enough stowed away in old coffers to last Pietro to the end of his existence. The wages and perquisites he received from Count Contarini were next to nothing; but, nevertheless, he was cheerful, contented, and zealous. He loved the old family, did Pietro—at least he said he did—and by way of marking his emotion he used to rub a faded sleeve over his grey twinkling eyes, and the sleeve was ample enough to conceal the grin on his mouth; it was really a capital place, for the Austrian police paid him excellent wages. If the servant was contented, so also was the master. Count Contarini knew that a spy he *must* have in his house, and he obtained the service of a zealous, but not particularly acute, servant at merely nominal cost. It was easy enough to hoodwink Pietro; indeed, Count Contarini thought the Austrians had got by far the worst of the bargain, for so far as motive went, it was clearly against Pietro's interest

to lose an excellent place through divulging secrets, which would cause his master to be imprisoned, and the household to be broken up—besides, the thing was a system, and directly things become systems and shape themselves to our daily life, we insensibly accept them, just as, in truth, we accept many doubtful and indefensible arrangements in our own domestic establishments, large or small, here in England.

Nevertheless, even considered philosophically, edged tools do remain dangerous playthings, and there was a grand opportunity for Pietro to gain a lump sum which would save him from all further menial service, and by judicious investment render him comfortable to the end of his days. The Austrian authorities had offered ten thousand florins for the body of Count Grimani, dead or alive, and Pietro seemed to be the very man destined to win this reward. He believed, and indeed the Austrian police had warned him, that the Count was accustomed to pay secret visits to the Palazzo

Contarini—but when and how? He flattered himself that he knew every secret of the old walls, but there was clearly some means of hidden access to the grand saloon of the mansion which he had failed to discover. The chase was becoming fast and furious, and Pietro had received personal instructions from Baron Falkenberg, who was the chief of the Austrian police in Venice, to sound inch by inch the walls of the saloon. With long brush and duster, on pretence of thoroughly cleaning the decorations, did Pietro set to his task—he sang snatches of Italian national songs by way of deceiving his master in case he should be within earshot, and he interlarded his singing with low oaths of impatience and ejaculations of hope, as now and then, a hollow sound, in answer to his tapping, gave promise of success—but the hollow sound came chiefly from loose plaster decoration, and was merely delusive.

“If I could but find it, that fox’s hole, and then one fine day I should trap the fox,

and then ten thousand florins ! Why, Pietro, with ten thousand florins you would be a gentleman at large, bless the saints ! and not one soul the wiser for your day's work. Ten thousand florins ! It must be mine sooner or later, for my trap is baited with the lady of his love, that proud signorina, my mistress Vittoria—not that she loves him, but she draws him here, as the steam and bubble of the cookshop draw me ; we poor devils of men are the puppets of love or hunger." Pietro's occupation was interrupted by the voice of Count Contarini outside the room.

"Open the door, Pietro ;" the Count was endeavouring in vain to open the door.

"Plague upon it," muttered Pietro ; "that lock was mended yesterday."

"Quick, Pietro, quick !" exclaimed the Count, with impatience.

"The old fool," responded Pietro, in an undertone, "he's always fumbling with the locks." Pietro went to the door and, turn-

ing the handle with the greatest ease, admitted his master.

“That locksmith is a rascal, a fool, a blundering idiot!” exclaimed the Count, with affected anger as he entered.

“A thousand pardons, Signor! I can open it easily enough,” replied Pietro.

“Yes, from the inside,” rejoined the Count with emphasis; “it’s from the outside that it sticks—let it be mended, do you hear.”

“Certainly, Signor,” answered Pietro, submissively, and he examined the lock. “It’s not the lock,” thought Pietro, “it’s only an excuse for closing the door against me,” and then, by way of sustaining his patriotism, he began humming a national song.

“Curse that tongue of yours, Pietro; we shall have the Austrians down upon us in a minute.”

“A million pardons,” whined Pietro; “it’s so hard not to sing of freedom, with the love of poor Venice at the bottom of one’s heart.”

It was the Count's policy to assume the fidelity of Pietro.

"It will be harder singing in an Austrian dungeon, you fool. Now be off; you can't mend that lock by staring at it."

"He's a cunning dog, my master," muttered Pietro; "but I'm more cunning still," and with an obsequious bow he shuffled out of the room.

The Count hurried to the door and thrust a small wedge into the latch, and drawing over the door a hanging of thick antique tapestry, he gave three low stamps on the floor with his foot, a panel flew back in the very part of the wall which Pietro had been testing, and Count Grimani entered from a secret passage.

It was an anxious greeting on the part of Count Contarini. "Ah, Grimani, I always tremble when you set foot in this house—that cursed Pietro!"

"You don't value Pietro as you ought," answered Grimani calmly, and a sarcastic smile played for a moment on his thin

expressive lips. "Pietro is a fool, and therefore invaluable to us. He hasn't yet learnt that walls have ears. He literally whispered all his designs into my ear as I stood behind the panel; but, indeed, Pietro and myself are old friends, and just now we are both in Austrian pay. Falkenberg isn't the brightest of men, and as a last resource he's paying me excellent wages to catch myself."

"You run fearful risks," exclaimed Contarini.

"Audacity is safety," answered Grimani, quietly.

"Nay, but Cavour's motto, prudent audacity."

"No time to think of prudence," replied Grimani, and grasping Contarini's hand he addressed him in low but fervent words, and as he spoke his countenance, naturally calm and impassive, grew intensely animated, and his dark eyes flashed with emotion. "Oh, Contarini, the day that you and I have longed for through these

dark years of oppression and despair has dawned at last. Listen to the glorious hope. Austria is at her wit's end for men—every nerve is being strained to meet the army of Victor Emmanuel before Custoza—the garrison here in Venice is reduced to well-nigh a handful of their worst troops—Croats and such like scum—we are in secret communication with the Italian government—the fleet of Italy is cruising off Malamocco—Cialdini is advancing by forced marches on Rovigo."

"Oh, my friend," exclaimed Contarini with emotion, "Vittoria ought to hear these words of hope."

"In good time, Contarini," answered Grimani, in a tone of sarcasm. "Women have their value, but not as conspirators."

"Vittoria is my daughter," replied Contarini proudly, "and hatred of the Austrian runs in her blood."

"Aye, the greater danger lest her feelings should betray us," rejoined Grimani impassively. "In Venice, emotion itself is a

traitor—well, well, she shall know the truth later, but not now.” And then, with passionate utterance, he exclaimed, “At last we may dare to strike a blow for freedom; the secret society has commanded all true Venetian men to hold themselves in readiness—an *émeute* is impending! One struggle, and the flag of Italy waves over the Piazza of St. Mark.”

“An insurrection!” exclaimed Count Contarini with surprise, “but—”

“‘But!’” rejoined Grimani with vehemence—“but if we die, that flag waves over our dead bodies. Venice is free, and we are avenged!” Vittoria entered the chamber by a door leading from her own rooms. In an instant Grimani reverted to his usual impassive state. “Ah, my dearest,” he exclaimed, and whispering to Contarini not to reveal the imparted intelligence, he advanced to meet his betrothed.

“One kiss, Vittoria.”

“No, Count Grimani,” and she shrank from him, waving him back, “not now.”

“Why so cold?” he asked.

“Cold!” she replied, with a flush of indignation mantling her countenance; “my face burns with shame, and my lips—oh, vile thought.”

“Vittoria,” expostulated her father, “you have sworn to keep that outrage a secret.”

“From my brother Marco,” replied Vittoria; “not from this man, my affianced husband, the guardian of my honour. Count Grimani, a few words will tell the story of the shameful insult to which I have been exposed. I had gone to St. Mark’s last evening——”

“It was contrary to my wishes,” exclaimed Contarini bitterly.

“I know I was wrong,” she answered, in tones of deprecation, “but it was the anniversary of Daniel Manin’s death far away in Paris—it seemed so hard not to utter one prayer for the love of him who endured so much for Venice. I was returning with Marietta to the gondola,” she continued in trembling words; “we were suddenly sur-

rounded by a crowd of Austrian officers reeling from the café Quadri; one of these men seized me by the arm—tore aside my veil—I strove to free myself from his grasp”—she hesitated, words failed her for the moment in the very force of her indignation.

“I know the story,” said Count Grimani calmly.

“You know it?” exclaimed Vittoria with surprise.

“I know all things that occur in Venice,” he answered in the same impassive tone; “he kissed you.”

She clasped her hands over her face; she was ashamed to hear those hateful words spoken by his lips.

“Do you know this man’s name?” she asked, after a pause.

“I do; Maximilian von Stettenheim, Colonel of the Third Regiment of Croats.”

“You tell me this man’s name,” she replied, nettled by his apparent indifference; “can you tell me that the insult is avenged?”

“I cannot,” he answered quietly.

“You cannot, and you are my affianced husband,” she rejoined in a tone of sarcasm.

“But with a price upon my head,” he answered, wincing at her reproach.

“I know that,” she replied quickly. “But why so little moved by what concerns your honour as well as mine ?”

“Not empty words which weaken resolution, Vittoria, but deeds when the hour comes. Do you think that freak of yours last evening cost me nothing ?” he continued, in passionate utterance. “Though you knew it not, I was close at hand when that man laid his cursed hands on you—kissed your lips. I could have struck him down dead at my feet, but I had to stand like a thing of stone and behold the outrage, for I have sworn that fearful oath—‘before all things,’ aye, flesh and blood, ‘Venice.’ I should have been arrested, the head of the secret society captured—shot for the sake of a woman ; I have sworn only to die for the freedom of Venice. But patience,

you shall be avenged in good time ; I dare not strike openly, but I will strike, and this Austrian dog shall bite the dust."

"I understand your meaning," replied Vittoria mournfully ; "the dagger ! No, Count Grimani ; better the insult remain unavenged, than that the name of Vittoria Contarini be linked with a new disgrace."

"Oh, woman, give me justice," he rejoined bitterly. "Have I a sword to use ? I was a soldier in '48 I received my baptism of fire from the Austrian batteries at Novara ; I received the cross of honour from the hands of Daniel Manin. Justice, I say ; what weapon have those cursed Austrians left me but the knife, the coward's tool ? I, a soldier of Italy, lie and skulk, a spy in the Austrian quarters. I accept the shame, Vittoria ; I endure it for the love of Venice."

"The love of Venice," she exclaimed with fervour. "Oh, save her from all stain of dishonour ! The day of her freedom will

come; let her be spotless in that day of triumph."

"Aye, you women with your pretty fancies," answered Grimani contemptuously. "The building will, indeed, be fair to look on; but there's rough work to be done first, and the hands of the workmen must needs be soiled with their work—first rubble, then the fair, white marble."

The voice of Pietro from the outside intervened in the discussion.

"Open the door, Signor! open the door!" The voice of Pietro effectually terminated the discussion, by forcing Count Grimani to retire by the sliding panel.

"Open the door yourself, you fool," exclaimed Count Contarini in an assumed tone of mockery; "you said the lock was all right."

"Open, Signor, pray open," reiterated Pietro.

Contarini, as soon as he was assured of the safety of Grimani, withdrew the wedge, and opened the door to Pietro. "You see,

it does stick on the outside," he remarked with emphasis, as the servant entered.

"Oh, Signor," exclaimed Pietro with some affectation of alarm, "there's something wrong; Count Platten of the third regiment of Croats waits below; here's his card."

"Count Platten!" exclaimed Contarini with alarm. "What's the meaning of this?"

"He desires to see you," answered Pietro; "merely a private visit, he told me to say."

"A private visit from an Austrian!" exclaimed the Count. "Impossible! It means some mischief or the other; but there's no help for it, show him up."

As soon as Pietro had withdrawn, Vittoria flew to her father with deepest anxiety. "You must not see this man," she exclaimed; "I will meet him—make some excuse for your absence—he cannot harm me, but perhaps they come to arrest you. Oh, do listen to my entreaties; there's the

panel passage, you'll be safe for the time ; if you love me, do as I wish ; " and, overcoming his reluctance, she forced her father to retire by the panel door. At that very moment her brother Marco entered the chamber by the door leading from her apartments. She flew to him, and addressed him in words incoherent with alarm. " Marco, dearest, do not come here now ; the Austrians are in the house ; back to my room, conceal yourself—I shall be quite safe ; back, I say, they won't dare to harm a woman—Count Platten comes."

" Count Platten," answered Marco, with deliberation ; " I expected the visit."

" You expected this man ?" she exclaimed with surprise.

" Yes, sweet sister ; you must leave us ; we have business together."

Count Platten was announced by Pietro, and entered the room. He was a young man of somewhat ungainly aspect, his face white and puffy, but evidently an officer and a gentleman, and not a police agent.

He appeared to be greatly taken aback by being ushered into the presence of a lady, for he blushed deeply, bowed with the greatest ceremony to Marco, and stammered with nervousness, "Have I the honour of addressing Count Marco Contarini?"

"Your obedient servant," responded Marco, with a bow of equal ceremony.

Platten then bowed to Vittoria with the greatest politeness; she returned his bow with studied coldness.

"My sister, the Countess Vittoria Contarini,—Count Platten," said Marco; and turning to his sister, he said with significance, "This gentleman will pardon your absence, Vittoria."

"I pray you, madam," said Platten, with the utmost courtesy, "not to let my unwilling intrusion drive you away; one moment will suffice for my business with Count Marco." He then whispered in Marco's ear, "You of course understand the object of my visit. I wait on you to inquire the name of your second."

“Count Salvetti,” answered Marco in a low tone.

Vittoria felt she ought to obey her brother’s injunction to leave the room, but her steps dragged with a weight of lead as she strove to gain the door of her apartments. There was a terrible fascination in the whispered conversation of the two men, and although the words were inaudible, it held her spellbound on the threshold.

“Of course, no friendly intervention is possible,” observed Platten.

Marco bowed in acquiescence.

“We propose to-morrow, at daybreak,” continued Platten.

“Count Salvetti will arrange all the preliminaries,” answered Marco. “I am now in his hands.”

“There is no occasion for me to intrude upon you any longer,” observed Platten. “I have the honour to wish you good morning.” And with ceremonious bows on both sides, Marco opening the door with marked politeness, Platten left the room.

Vittoria guessed but too well the terrible purpose concealed beneath this formal courtesy. She flew to Marco's side, and clasped his hands — “A duel! Merciful Heaven! what does it mean?”

“It means, sweet sister,” answered Marco sternly, “that I have avenged that insult.”

“Marco!” she exclaimed, breaking from him in dismay.

“I laid my cane across the lips of that man, and drew blood.”

“Rashness! madness!” she answered.

“Madness!—are you not my sister?”

“I meant to keep this insult a secret from you, from every one, except my father and Count Grimani. How did you learn it?”

“I learnt it,” he answered, “in a brutal boast from those very lips which I have struck.”

“The worst has come!” she exclaimed, in tones of despair. “Oh, Marco! it is too fearful to think you should have done all this for my sake—that you should risk your

life for my miserable wilfulness. Your life ! nay, my life, which is bound up in yours. Oh, Marco ! you are the being I love most on earth !—brother, more than brother ! ” She turned away from him. “ Oh, merciful Heaven ! ” she murmured in her anguish, “ to be the cause of his death ! ” for she knew full well that this Stettenheim was famed for his skill as a swordsman, and that her brother, a mere boy, must be helpless when matched against such an antagonist, and tears filled her eyes.

“ Vittoria,” he exclaimed reproachfully, “ you unnerve me with this weeping.”

“ I only care for your safety,” she answered. “ I can forgive that insult—for give everything.”

“ I can never forgive the dishonour of our family,” he rejoined, sternly. “ My father, at least, need know nothing of this affair until it is over. I bind you to silence.”

“ Alas, Marco ! our father knows of this visit of Count Platten. He is even now

concealed in the secret passage with Count Grimani. I dare not delay; I must let them know that the Austrian has gone." She replaced the wedge in the latch, and gave the accustomed signal. Her father and Grimani entered from their lurking-place.

"Well, Vittoria," inquired Contarini anxiously, "what was the purpose of this Austrian intrusion?"

Marco looked at her significantly. She hesitated.

"Well?" exclaimed Contarini with impatience.

"It was——" She stammered for the moment, but feeling it was in vain to conceal the truth, she added, with rapid utterance, "Alas, my father! he came here with a terrible purpose. Marco has struck that Austrian for the insult he offered to me."

"Struck Colonel Von Stettenheim!" exclaimed Contarini with dismay. "A challenge!" he murmured. "Heaven help us!"

And he turned with bitterness from Vittoria.

“ Stettenheim for an antagonist ! ” muttered Grimani. “ A heavy price to pay for the privilege of prayer.”

She felt utterly downcast in the consciousness of the terrible results of her indiscretion ; but Marco drew her towards him, and kissed her with more than usual tenderness. “ It was no fault of yours, sweet sister, that this insult was offered to you and to us. No blame rests on your head, whatever happens ; remember that,” he added, in serious tone.

“ Alas, Marco ! ” exclaimed Contarini, in deepest sorrow, “ that you should have been rash enough to provoke an encounter with such an antagonist as Stettenheim.”

“ Oh, my father ! ” responded Marco with fervour, “ could any one worthy of the name of Contarini stand motionless as a statue, among a crowd of brutal Austrians, and listen to that triumphant boast—a sister’s name, a sister’s honour, trampled in

the dust? I tell you, I would have struck that man, if death had followed on the moment."

Count Contarini could not trust himself to make any reply to his son's words; he was fully persuaded that the encounter could have but one result, and with a gesture of despair he turned away.

Vittoria watched him with increased dismay. "Marco, dearest brother," she whispered in her anguish, "I beseech you not to fight this man."

"What do you say?" he asked in indignant voice.

"Perhaps an apology," she stammered.

"Impossible," he answered; "you do not know what you are saying."

"If I could only see Count Salvetti," she urged.

"Silence, Vittoria," he interposed with stern voice. "Never mention that word apology again, or dear as you are to me, I shall hate you. Recollect that my honour, the honour of our family,—more than all

this, the honour of Venice, compels this duel. Time presses; I have arrangements to make with Count Salvetti ; ” and he left the room.

“ Lost ! lost ! ” murmured Count Contarini, when his son had departed. “ The last of my house sacrificed—the last of the Contarini. Aye, sacrificed to a woman’s whim,” he exclaimed, turning with anger on Vittoria—“ a daughter’s disobedience.”

“ Have mercy ! ” she pleaded, with tears in her eyes. “ I would do anything to repair this mischief, endure any abasement, grovel to the dust to save his life.”

“ You can do nothing,” her father answered with bitterness. “ In such matters women can easily lay the fuel, but they cannot extinguish the flame. Remember this, if he fall to-morrow, his blood will be on your head—I will never look upon your face again.” With these hard words Count Contarini turned away; and, almost tottering to a chair, sank down—burying his face in his hands.

It was well-nigh a father's curse. She sorely needed love and support, and Count Grimani stood apart perfectly impassive. Neither her sorrow nor her honour, seemed to evoke any sympathy in that stern, hard face. But in justice and defence it must be urged that Count Grimani was an enthusiastic patriot; for life or death he had verily put his hand to the plough; his thoughts were wholly absorbed by Venice, and a woman's error and a woman's sorrow, seemed small matters when measured against the thrilling hope of freedom and triumph. Still, Count Grimani was her only hope. "Carlo," she cried in her despair, "can nothing be done to avert this duel?"

"Nothing," he answered briefly. "Recollect a blow has been struck, and by the military code a blow must be washed away by blood."

"Has he any chance against this man?" she asked, with a sickening anticipation of the reply; and the reply justified the anticipation.

“I can give but little hope. It is very fatal to cross swords with Stettenheim.”

“Oh, miserable thought!” she murmured, “that I must remain quietly here while he faces death. Oh, Carlo! Carlo! for mercy’s sake, tell me there is something I can do.”

“I know of nothing,” he rejoined carelessly; and, scarcely measuring his words, he added, “Well, you can pray; women find prayer an employment for idle time.”

“I *can* pray,” she replied, stung to firmness by his mockery. “You may deride my weakness, but there is One to whose love weakness is a sure path—beyond the blue sky—Christ and His Mother’s love!” and she turned from him to seek that other help.

Patriot as he was, he forgot his burning hope as he gazed upon her, for she looked so noble beneath her weight of sorrow.

“Vittoria,” he exclaimed, “I see a way to save him.”

She flew to his side. “To save him! Oh, Carlo! I shall love you so much; you

will be so dear to me then ; ”—she grasped his hands—“ I shall love you with my whole heart.”

Such love was a great jewel, and Grimani knew it. “ I will save him,” he exclaimed with emphasis ; “ my word on it.”

“ How ? ” she inquired eagerly. “ Oh, tell me ! ”

“ Nay, I have my secret,” he answered. “ My work is never told in words.”

For all his pledge, she drew back from him in sorrow. “ Alas ! I guess the secret. You will save his life, as you would vindicate my honour—the dagger. No, Count Grimani ; I have a better way.”

“ A better way ! ” he exclaimed with surprise. “ What way ? ”

“ That prayer which you despise,” she answered ; and once more she turned aside from him, and the knell of the Angelus was borne across the water.

Count Grimani shrugged his shoulders contemptuously ; women and their fancies were beyond the ken of his materialistic

theories ; but he resolved to hold to his own method, and at all hazards save the life of Marco. He withdrew by the panel passage, and Vittoria threw herself in devotion before a shrine of the Virgin, which the piety of her ancestors had made portion of the furniture of the chamber, and she prayed fervently that the curse which hung over her head might mercifully be averted.

CHAPTER III.

THE FRANCISCAN SETS HIS OWN TRAP.

BARON FALKENBERG had surveyed the horizon, and duly noted the clouds. He was fully conscious of the gravity of the situation, but he was not dismayed. He had perfect faith in that great bureaucratic system in which he had been nurtured—he had been taught to believe, and he did very firmly believe, that red-tape and dockets govern the world, always premising that the red-tape must be tied according to traditional knot, and the dockets folded according to traditional pattern. Thus, possessing the tape, the dockets, the tying, and folding, you possessed the rod of em-

pire. Granted the difficulty of the situation, the solution was perfectly simple—if red-tape and dockets were good for ordinary conditions, then more red-tape and more dockets would be required for extraordinary ones—given only more official *minutiae*, more official zeal, and the *status in quo* would be effectually preserved.

I do not affirm that Baron Falkenberg's theory has always been successful in practice—quite the contrary; but it is a theory of such transparent simplicity, and it lends itself so easily to the comprehension of mankind, that it has always been a favourite with persons who are miscalled statesmen, and many nations which have gone to wreck and ruin through its practice, have faithfully adhered to it as a method of political and social restoration.

Well, Italy was in a ferment—Germany was in a ferment—Venice was in a ferment, but Baron Falkenberg was master of himself. The great deep underlying influences which sway mankind were moving like the

ground-swell ere the coming storm—but Baron Falkenberg stood firmly rooted upon his bureaucratic faith. I will not say he was calm—the perfect official is usually fussy on great occasions, for an aggregate of small things is not conducive to calmness, and with Baron Falkenberg zeal took the form of petulance—but every official appliance was in perfect order ; outside, indeed, the vast movement towards Italian unity—inside, an office working at high-pressure tension—spies everywhere, spying everything—zealous clerks at huge folios, recording everything alphabetically, with accurately-ruled margins—nothing too big, nothing too little for their penmanship—a touch of a bell from Baron Falkenberg's desk, and a clerk, breathless with hurry, and excitement, and zeal, would in two minutes produce a ponderous tome, containing the sayings and doings of this or that suspected family.

It so chanced that on the evening of the very day on which Count Platten had con-

veyed the challenge to Marco Contarini, Baron Falkenberg was pacing up and down his official chamber on the tip-toe of expectation; the whole power of his office had been unsuccessfully applied to the capture of Count Grimani, but the last new spy who had been enlisted into the service had satisfactorily indicated the whereabouts of the fugitive, and had moreover undertaken to lead a posse of police agents to the very spot where, at a given hour, he would probably be found.

The Baron was not best pleased with the authorities at Vienna; he had just received a despatch ordering two more regiments to leave the garrison of Venice and join the head-quarters of the army on the Mincio—he had undertaken to hold the city with a given number of men, but this number had already been greatly reduced—and this, too, in the face of vague rumours of an intended *émeute*.

“Does the Council at Vienna,” he murmured, “think I can hold the city by moral

force ? I might hold it with half the number of men, if I could lay hands on that arch-conspirator, Grimani, the very soul of that infernal National Society. I've held the cursed brood a dozen times in my hand, but at the grasp of my fingers they slip away like phantoms." He struck the bell upon his desk with petulant force—an obsequious office messenger responded quickly to the summons.

"Any fresh intelligence of this Grimani ? Has Father Onofrio returned ? "

"Not yet, your Excellency."

"Let him report himself to me the moment he enters."

"Number 23 has just reported himself," observed the messenger.

"The Contarini spy !" exclaimed the Baron. "Where is he ? "

"With the chief clerk of the secret intelligence department, undergoing the formal interrogatories."

"I'll question him myself," exclaimed Falkenberg. "Send him in, and let him be

accompanied by the clerk who enters letter 'C.'

With a profound bow the messenger left the chamber.

"These Contarini must be closely watched," muttered Falkenberg. "There's danger in that old Count Contarini, with his affected submission to our rule. I'll wager my life that this plot for an insurrection is being hatched under his very roof." The clerk of letter "C" entered with a heavy ledger-like book under his arm, which he laid on the desk before his chief.

"Find the Contarini heading!"

The clerk obeyed, opening the book at the required place.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Falkenberg with surprise and extreme displeasure; "what's the meaning of this? no margin, and no ruled lines! Is this a time, sir, to despise the great traditions of our office?" he asked with severity.

The clerk of letter "C" grew very red,

and stammered something about a new clerk and press of business, and he thought perhaps it wouldn't matter !

"Not matter, sir!" exclaimed Falkenberg with vehemence ; "fidelity in the little is fidelity in the large. Pshaw!" he continued peevishly, "I can't read without a proper margin. I've always been accustomed to a margin—a margin is the essence of official life. What's this? 'Lock hampered yesterday,' 'detected strange voice ;' hum—send in the spy.'"

The clerk obeyed with alacrity ; he was only too happy to escape from further dissertation upon marginal virtue. Pietro was ushered into the room ; he had doffed his livery, and assumed the disguise of a gondolier. He felt very ill at ease ; it was the second time he had stood face to face with Baron Falkenberg in an official position, and an interview with the Baron was not a thing to be lightly forgotten.

"Well, you lazy scoundrel, you've not managed to earn your ten thousand florins all this time."

“Not yet, your Excellency,” answered Pietro in trembling voice; “but I shall soon, I’m sure I shall—only give me time.”

“Has that lock been hampered again?” inquired Falkenberg, referring to the ledger.

“The lock is right enough, please your Excellency,” replied Pietro, with a cunning grin; “it was the door, which was fastened against me this morning when I tried to enter the saloon. I again detected a strange voice.”

“And when they admitted you?” eagerly inquired the Baron.

“I found nobody but the Count and his daughter,” rejoined Pietro.

The Baron again consulted the ledger, and carefully weighed the recorded information. All the movements of the Count were accurately noted, together with his household expenditure to the smallest item.

“Draw an order for the arrest of Count Contarini!” exclaimed the Baron, after a short period of thought. “I’ll sign it forthwith——”

The office messenger entered to inform the Baron of Father Onofrio's return.

"Send him in!" exclaimed the Baron, with impatience.

Father Onofrio, as he was styled, was the last spy added to the staff of the Secret Intelligence Department. He had been recommended by a spy in whom great confidence was placed. This Onofrio confessed that he had himself tampered with dangerous things and dangerous persons ; but he had been snubbed and slighted by the National Society. He was needy, well-nigh starving—he was ready to sell his knowledge for very bread ; and, although he had never *quite* succeeded in effecting the arrest of any of the members of the dangerous band, his information up to a certain point had been proved to be correct. It must be mentioned that the Baron personally, did not by any means approve of the *soi-disant* Father. The man was rough and brusque, dare-devil and defiant ; he was accustomed doggedly to dictate his own course of action.

This was objectionable enough, but the sting lay in the fact, that the spy's suggestions were manifestly superior to the suggestions emanating from the Baron, whose *amour propre* was thereby constantly wounded. Nevertheless, Onofrio was not a man to be discarded at a desperate juncture.

Father Onofrio was announced, and Count Grimani stalked into the room in the garb of a Franciscan. He loved the disguise; he was forced to tell lies, and he enjoyed the satire of telling them in the despised dress of a monk. There was a marked contrast between his manner and the obsequious manner of Pietro. Without the slightest invitation on the part of the Baron, he threw himself into a chair, and thrust out his legs with affected weariness.

“Have you secured that devil, Grimani?” inquired the Baron eagerly.

“All but,” was the answer vouchsafed.

“All but!” exclaimed the Baron with impatience,—“the old story.”

“No thanks, of course,” retorted Grimani, sullenly. “Why, we tracked the fox to his hole—fox, do I say? No, bird; for he must have escaped us by flight through the air. Every cranny that a weasel could have wriggled through was stopped. I held the salt in hand; just one pinch on his tail, I said, and the ten thousand florins are mine; but the bird had flown! ”

“Curses on it!” ejaculated Falkenberg.

“My own exclamation,” continued Grimani, calmly, “for I had lost the ten thousand florins; but we gained something—we seized a printing-press, and a lot of papers just worked off—a proclamation, apparently! Come, come,” and Grimani’s manner changed to banter; “you’ve got him, Baron—pshaw! you’re playing with me—you’ve got him.”

“No, I tell you!” answered Falkenberg, in a provoked tone.

“Why, he flew into your hands!” exclaimed Grimani, derisively. “On the best authority, he fled to the Palazzo Contarini; what was Pietro doing? ”

“ The fool is here,” rejoined Falkenberg, glancing sternly at Pietro. “ Let him speak for himself.”

“ Oh, holy father ! ” cried Pietro, with alarm ; “ if I had only known—— ”

“ You might have guessed it,” answered Grimani. “ That hampered lock, Pietro—that hampered lock, yesterday ! —this morning ! You let the prize slip through your hands.”

“ Fool and idiot ! ” exclaimed Falkenberg, with more than usual petulance. “ I’ll have you strung up as a traitor—that I will ! ”

“ Mercy ! your Excellency,” whined Pietro, in abject terror—“ mercy ! This Grimani is too much for a man’s wits.”

“ To think we should have lost such a chance ! ” continued Falkenberg, losing all command of temper. “ Well, if we’ve not secured Grimani, at least we’ll make sure of one traitor—Contarini shall be arrested forthwith.”

“ Contarini arrested ! ” exclaimed Grimani, without betraying any emotion.

“The warrant’s being now drawn ; every hole and corner of that cursed palazzo shall be searched.”

“By all means,” answered Grimani, quietly ; “but if you intend playing the game in that manner, I must throw up the cards.”

“What do you mean ?” asked Falkenberg, nettled by the significant smile on Grimani’s lips.

“Why, the thing’s as clear as day,” exclaimed Grimani, with assumed impatience. “If you arrest Contarini, you scare the bird from the covert ; leave Contarini undisturbed, and Grimani must be caught in the trap.”

“Aye, aye,” assented Falkenberg, with very ill grace. “We’ll draw a cordon of spies round the house. Pietro can manage to conceal some of our most trusty men ; then at a signal——”

“Then at a signal !” echoed Grimani, contemptuously. “Pshaw ! Do you think that’s the sort of snare to set for Grimani ?

Why, Grimani can scent an Austrian plot a mile off. No, no ; there must be no cordon of spies, no police concealed in the house—the game must be played by Pietro alone. There, Baron, my hand on it,” and he gripped Falkenberg’s hand with sudden grasp ; “to-morrow evening, Count Grimani in his own person shall stand face to face with you.” He then turned to Pietro. “The game is in your hands, Pietro ; be on the alert. When you have ascertained that Grimani is really in the Palazzo Contarini, you must give some signal——”

“I have it !” exclaimed Falkenberg, anxious to contribute some slight quota to the scheme. “A gondolier shall be kept plying, as if by accident, before the Palazzo ; at a wave of the hand he shall shoot beneath the balcony. Drop this signet ring to him.” Falkenberg drew the ring from his finger, and gave it to Pietro. “In ten minutes the house shall be surrounded by soldiers.”

“Excellent device,” exclaimed Grimani,

in patronizing tone ; “ but don’t let spy or soldier approach until Pietro gives the signal, or all the labour will be lost. To your post, Pietro,” he continued ; “ vigilance, and the reward is ours.”

“ Your last chance, Pietro ! ” said Falkenberg, with threatening gesture. “ Success, and your fortune is made ; failure, and, by Heaven—— ” Pietro, with many bows and protestations of zeal, shuffled out of the room, right glad to make his escape with a whole skin.

“ Any further commands ? ” demanded Grimani, lapsing into his usual dogged manner.

“ No ; by the way, the papers you seized ? ”

“ I had almost forgotten them,” answered Grimani, carelessly. “ A proclamation from the secret society ; ” and he handed a roll of paper to Falkenberg, who scanned one of the copies with eagerness, Grimani standing close at hand, and looking over his shoulder as he read.

“Hum! Signed by the scoundrel himself,” observed Falkenberg. “Come, this is satisfactory. See, ‘The Secret Society of Venice strictly commands all true patriots to abstain from acts of violence towards the Austrians.’”

“Very satisfactory,” rejoined Grimani, drily.

“After all, this paper may only be some blind,” said Falkenberg, cautiously.

“It may,” assented Grimani, with that smile which always irritated his employer.

“I’ll not relax my vigilance,” said Falkenberg, endeavouring to command his temper. “If you have any intelligence to communicate, I shall be at Colonel von Stettenheim’s quarters this evening.

Falkenberg withdrew, but not before Grimani had succeeded in purloining the Vienna despatch from his pocket. A mean act, truly, but it was done for the love of Venice. Grimani glanced rapidly through the document. “Two more regiments ordered to the frontier! Then to-

morrow evening we strike the blow, and Venice will be free!" He cast the paper from him, and, with that burning hope of freedom, tears filled his eyes—the tears of a hard, stern man are more terrible than his curse; they told the story of a soul writhing with bitterness and shame, for Count Grimani was a patriot, and not a slave. He felt that he possessed the qualities of a statesman, and he was forced to pursue a calling which he abhorred. He knew, as his tears fell on the rough, brown sleeve, that freedom would wash the stain of falsehood and deceit from his soul; no longer a mean trickster through the curse of tyranny, but a freeman, with freedom's gift of truth and honour. "Not yet," he murmured, "not this night, but to-morrow—death or liberty; and now, one *last* lie to save that rash boy's life, and win Vittoria's cold heart!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAFÉ SINGER.

MAXIMILIAN VON STETTENHEIM was adored by every man in his regiment. He was by popular admission the very beau ideal of an officer and an accomplished gentleman. It must be confessed that he offered a very fascinating but evil example to the young officers who fell under his command. He was handsome and of gallant bearing ; he possessed a *bonhommie* which was irresistible ; and he viewed all the events of life through a medium of good-natured, easy cynicism which was very piquant and amusing. And this tinge of cynicism was ever deepest and most amusing in its spirit

of depreciation when women and love formed the topic of conversation. Nor was even the thought of death free from this taint. "I've tasted all the pleasures," he would affirm—"drained the cup—repetition is not happiness!" and, as the smoke of the cigar curled from his handsome lips, the young men who listened to his words, thought that cynicism was the greatest of all gifts, and that a light sneer afforded the best solution for the riddles of human life; and they little witted, and as little he as they, that their master would one day learn, and through that very love which he so greatly despised, the fallacy of this mess-room philosophy. In a strictly military point of view, Colonel Von Stettenheim was admitted on all hands to be a magnificent regimental officer. He had gained his command at an early age, through Court influence, but he had deserved it for acts of cool audacity on the battle-field; and he possessed the power, which only belongs to men of power, of converting the easiest and

most familiar manner of the mess-room and social intercourse, into the rigid disciplinarianism of the parade-ground.

The Third Regiment of Croats was quartered in one of the forts which commanded the entrance landwards to Venice. Colonel von Stettenheim had for quarters a casemate chamber of large dimensions, and furnished with the necessaries, but certainly not the luxuries of life. There were sufficient tables and chairs, however, to accommodate all the officers when the Colonel gave a reception. In one corner of the room, screened off by a large folding screen, stood the Colonel's camp bed and toilet appliances. The Colonel's receptions were most popular, particularly with the younger officers. It was a recognized principle that every one was at perfect liberty to sing, laugh, talk, and make unrestricted noise, at pleasure. The tables were covered with varieties of drinks—Vienna beer being the special favourite—and tobacco in unlimited quantities; indeed,

an atmosphere of smoke, dense as a London fog, was held to be a necessary element in the entertainment.

The reception to which Baron Falkenberg was about to repair possessed a particular interest. The Colonel had announced his intention of offering to his guests some special attraction, the nature of which he declined to divulge. Always noisy as these entertainments were, the tiptoe of expectation added to the restless turmoil. Colonel von Stettenheim and three other officers of more mature age, were striving manfully to carry on a rubber in defiance of laughter and song; but old choruses of student life surged up ever and anon, and their boisterous jollity rendered scientific card-playing well-nigh impossible. Chief favourite of all these choruses, was that familiar student chorus, which embodies as a maxim, and not as a protest, in rhyming Latin verses set to a tune of swinging lilt, those words of St. Paul, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." " *Gaudeamus igitur*, let

us rejoice, therefore, whilst we are young, because, after jolly youth, and after decrepit old age, the grave lays hold of us." The chorus was in thorough harmony with the Colonel's philosophy; and it was a right good chorus for light hearts to carol in that *gaieté de cœur* of youth, ere the coming of the latter days, when indigestion and the many other ills this flesh is heir to, convert the maxim into a sarcasm.

But though the philosophy of the song accorded with the Colonel's theories of life, the noise was too much for endurance. The Colonel lost the rubber. "Come, you fellows," he exclaimed in good-humoured protest; "less of that dreadful row. Here's a compact with you. Believe us from this abuse of vocal art, and I'll reward you with songs worth the hearing."

"Hurrah, gentlemen," exclaimed a young officer; "Colonel Max is about to give us a song."

"Bravo!" was the cry from all parts of the chamber. "Silence for Colonel Max!"

“ Songs, gentlemen,” exclaimed the Colonel, “ but not from my lips. I’ve engaged that little minx, the café singer, Stella, to come to my rooms to-night.”

The announcement was received with general acclamation.

“ Little Stella,” exclaimed an officer, “ with her delicious affectation of modesty ! ”

“ And all her wicked impudence underneath,” rejoined another officer. “ What, guitar and all, Colonel Max ? ”

“ Yes, guitar, and impudence, and modesty, all combined,” answered the Colonel. “ Egad, the girl was half afraid to venture here alone, in such—what shall I say ? —good company ; but I’ve pledged my word she shall be treated like a princess at the very least. And now, young gentlemen, as a reward for my generous act, permit us, ancient fogies as we are, to play our game in peace.” The Colonel resumed his seat. “ Deal, Major Stoltz ! ” and the Major proceeded to shuffle the cards ; but the game was interrupted by the entrance of Baron Falkenberg.

“Ah, Baron,” exclaimed the Colonel, rising to meet his guest; “welcome to a soldier’s quarters. Gentlemen, permit me—Baron Falkenberg! Pshaw! you all know the Baron—the guardian angel of every son of the Fatherland here in Venice.”

“By the way, Baron,” inquired Major Stoltz in a slight tone of banter, “is that fellow Grimani secured yet?”

“Not a fair question, Stoltz,” interrupted the Colonel; “military men have no business to pry into the mystery of civil affairs.”

“Egad,” exclaimed Falkenberg, somewhat nettled, “I wish some of you gentlemen had the pleasure of looking after that scoundrel. He leads me a perfect life of hide and seek.”

“Come, I’ll undertake to find him for you,” exclaimed the Colonel.

“Where I fail, you’d find it a hard matter to succeed,” rejoined Falkenberg, somewhat pettishly.

“Pardon me,” continued the Colonel.

“The truth is, you civilians leave these Venetians too much alone.”

“Leave them alone! Why, I watch them day and night!”

“I mean, you should endeavour to cultivate friendly relations with them—force them into terms of intimacy—break up that frozen barrier which stands between Austria and Venice.”

“Kiss the fair Venetians!” exclaimed Falkenberg, with a significant laugh.

“Well, that’s one method,” rejoined the Colonel.

“And a good method, too,” cried several officers. “Bravo, Colonel Max, kissing for ever!”

“You youngsters must remember,” answered the Colonel in a tone of affected authority, “that in the matter of kissing, Colonels are permitted a certain discretionary power which is denied to subalterns.”

This dictum was met by a protesting murmur.

“Take my word for it, Baron,” continued

the Colonel with a smile, “there’s philosophy in a kiss. It destroys isolation. A kiss must have a sequence ! ”

“A sequence, yes—a blow ! ” rejoined Falkenberg drily. “I accept your words. Did you count the cost of that kiss, Colonel ? ”

“An impulse of the moment—some devil or the other of mischief had got into my blood ; I can’t account for it otherwise. I’d long been provoked beyond endurance by the quiet insolence of these Venetian women—the insufferable contempt they show towards us. I hadn’t a conception who the girl really was, and, for the matter of that, it was pitch dark, and I never saw her face after all, more’s the pity ; they say it’s a face worth looking at. A shriek—a black veil ; I tore it aside—more shrieks ; but I kissed her lips, egad—*voilà tout !*”

“Not *voilà tout*,” persisted Falkenberg ; “a duel.”

“Be it a duel,” rejoined the Colonel. “I

shall disarm that boy—or a flesh wound, perhaps ; the seconds will interpose, the honour of everybody will be satisfied—*c'est fini !*”

Falkenberg coughed a sceptical “hum,” and Stettenheim turned towards an orderly who was waiting to address him.

An Italian monk desired to see Colonel von Stettenheim on pressing business—the man would take no denial. The Colonel, with some impatience, gave directions to the orderly for the monk to be admitted.

“Has Stella arrived ?” inquired a chorus of anxious voices.

“You impatient boys !” answered the Colonel. “When you have reached my mature age, you’ll discover that no one woman is worth all this fuss ; the world is full enough of women, in all conscience, and one woman is extraordinarily like another.”

Grimani, in his Franciscan disguise, was ushered in by the orderly. His manner was entirely changed—he feigned intense terror ; his features were those of a man who had

experienced some great alarm—he stood dazed and helpless in the middle of the room.

“Why, it’s Onofrio ! ” exclaimed Falkenberg with surprise.

“ You know the fellow, do you ? ” said Stettenheim.

“ One of our spies, that’s all,” answered Falkenberg. “ What do you do here ? ” he inquired in a tone of displeasure.

As soon as Falkenberg had spoken, Grimani slunk up to him and cowered at his feet. “ Oh, Baron ! ” he cried in a thick tremulous voice, “ it’s a mercy I’m alive—the saints protect us ! I was going on my way when I left you—— Is it safe for me to speak ? ” he asked, glancing round in abject fear.

“ You are safe enough here ; these barracks are strong enough to protect you,” replied Falkenberg gruffly.

“ No place is safe,” answered Grimani, clutching the Baron’s hand in terror ; “ that fearful National Society can pierce

all walls—aye, doors of iron. I was seized, gagged, my eyes bandaged, a pistol held at my forehead: ‘Your life is forfeited !’ whispered a voice in my ear. ‘It is known to the Secret Society that you are an Austrian spy—every movement of yours is watched !’ My throat is dry !’ he gasped. “Drink, drink !”

A young officer good-naturedly brought him some wine, which he drank eagerly. “‘Your life is forfeited,’ whispered the voice, ‘for treachery to Venice !’ The cold metal touched my brow—I tasted death. After a terrible pause the voice continued, ‘Your life is spared—the hand of the avenger is stayed — the Secret Society chooses you as an instrument for its work: do that work or die !’”

“And the work?” exclaimed Falkenberg.

“I swore only to reveal it to the person whose interest it concerns.”

“His name ?” asked Falkenberg.

“Colonel von Stettenheim !”

“I am Colonel von Stettenheim !” exclaimed the Colonel, coming forward.

“Good sir, you are Colonel von Stettenheim ?” and Grimani rose to his feet.

“Yes, I tell you ; say what you have to say, and be brief.”

“We must be alone,” muttered Grimani.

“By your leave, gentlemen,” exclaimed the Colonel with impatience, “I’ll hear what the fellow has to say ;” and Falkenberg and the officers retired apart.

“This letter from the Secret Society of Venice to you, Colonel von Stettenheim,” and Grimani thrust a letter into the Colonel’s hand.

“Pshaw ! is that all ?” exclaimed the Colonel, and he glanced over the contents.

“Good sir,” continued Grimani in an undertone, “the voice bade me tell you that if you disobeyed the injunction you would surely die, that no power on earth can save you from vengeance, that the Secret Society would strike you down amid the bayonets of your men—the bayonets of your men !” he reiterated emphatically. “Oh, sir, be guided by me !”

“ Gentlemen,” exclaimed Stettenheim in an indignant tone, “ this letter is a very simple affair.”

“ For Heaven’s sake,” whispered Grimani in the Colonel’s ear, “ do not provoke vengeance by a revelation of the secret.”

“ Silence, fellow ! ” answered the Colonel, thrusting Grimani aside. “ Gentlemen, the National Society threatens me with death if Marco Contarini fall in this duel to-morrow. Assassination ! the vile cowards, do they think this threat will stay my hand ? ”

“ I pray you, sir,” interposed Grimani with strong affectation of terror, “ to think well of it. I speak as one whose own life is threatened.”

“ You have done your work, fellow—go ! ” answered Stettenheim with contempt.

“ No, no ; for mercy’s sake don’t drive me forth—it’s death to me—death ! ”

“ This is folly, Onofrio ! ” exclaimed Falkenberg, entirely deceived by the spy’s simulation of terror.

Grimani, with a look of despair, turned to the Baron and clung to him. "Save me, save me!" he cried in a piteous voice. "I dare not venture forth alone. I'm known as a spy now—it's death, death, I say!"

"We can give the fellow shelter till you go, Baron," said Stettenheim, moved to pity by Grimani's exhibition of alarm. "Ho, there!" An orderly entered in obedience to the summons. "Let this devout priest remain in the guard-room until Baron Falkenberg leaves the barracks."

"A thousand blessings for this protection," murmured Grimani; "a thousand blessings!" and, conducted by the orderly, he left the chamber. He felt he had won his point. "Bluster as he may, my gallant Colonel will think twice, before he allows his sword to do mortal injury to Marco Contarini."

Stettenheim was irritated rather than alarmed by the threat. "By my soul," he exclaimed, "the insolence of these威尼斯人 increases day by day! You'll join us

in our game, Baron? Egad, I wish the curs would rise and meet us hand to hand—a dose of lead would teach them better manners. I pray you, gentlemen, make merry. I'm sorry this singing girl has broken her faith; but if we lack the song, we've got the wine. My next invitation shall be a command.” An orderly entered and addressed a few words to the Colonel. “Ah, a woman below!” he exclaimed. “Hurrah, the girl has come at last, my boys! Here, some of you gallant fellows, go and welcome her. A princess, remember—I’ve given my word for an honourable greeting.” The Colonel’s commands were readily obeyed. “Let those boys run after a woman if they will,” he exclaimed with cynical brightness; “we have all been runners after that delusive prize in our day, and now the day has arrived for sitting still, hey Baron? Come, you, and I, and the Major, and our good friend the doctor here, will stick to cards. For my part, I’ve arrived at an age when that jade Fortune

courted at cards, is just as fascinating as the smiles of a woman."

"The *salons* of Vienna tell another tale," observed Falkenberg with a dry laugh.

"Ah, Baron, never believe what walls whisper—lath and plaster is a sad liar."

"I stand by my story," persisted the Baron; "in love or war, Colonel von Stettenheim always wins the victory."

"Come, come, Baron, not this levity amid the solemnity of *whist*—it's for you to deal."

Half-dragged, half-led, but with reluctant steps, and evidently dismayed by the boisterous greeting, the woman, closely veiled by the accustomed mantilla, was conducted triumphantly to Stettenheim's chamber. As she entered she was greeted by cries of "Brava ! Stella, brava !" and, surrounded by officers, she was led up to the *whist* table.

Stettenheim was engaged in sorting his cards, and his back was towards her. He was not at the trouble to rise or even turn

his head: he addressed her in tones of good-natured banter.

“Ah, faithless girl! better late than never. However, make up for it by giving these gentlemen some of your raciest songs —those extra wicked songs, I mean.”

“Brava! the wicked songs,” was echoed by a dozen voices.

“Let the girl have room to sing, gentlemen!” exclaimed Stettenheim; “make a circle. Begin Stella; no time to lose.”

The woman addressed a few words in a low tone to an officer near her.

“Hey, what does she say?” inquired Stettenheim.

“She says she wishes to see you alone,” replied the officer.

The words were greeted by a chorus of laughter.

“Nonsense, I don’t want to see her,” rejoined Stettenheim. “I want to hear her voice.”

The woman again spoke to the officer.

“Colonel Max, there’s some mistake; it

isn't Stella after all ; it's a lady who wishes to see you."

The badinage and banter waxed still more vehement.

" Well, gentlemen ! " exclaimed Falkenberg, rising from his chair, " I think, under these delicate circumstances, it would be becoming in us to withdraw."

" Nonsense ! " exclaimed Stettenheim, somewhat annoyed. " Pray sit still, Baron ; the lady must be good enough to wait until our game is finished, or go, if she prefers that course. I'm too much accustomed to impertinent intrusions of this sort," he added, in a lower tone. " It's for me to play, isn't it ? " and he threw down his card.

The group round the woman was broken up, and for the moment she was left standing alone. She elected to remain, and the young officer she had addressed, led her aside, and politely placed a chair for her behind the screen, which sheltered her from the general gaze of the room.

It is difficult to say how long this shelter would have been sufficient to save her from impertinent intrusion. A veil over a woman's face is a great provocation to curiosity ; and it was clearly manifest by his manner of reception, that their host did not consider her worthy of very dignified treatment : some excitement, moreover, was needful to compensate for the loss of the *café* singer's racy songs ; but fortune favoured the lady's incognito through a happy diversion of interest created by the arrival of Count Platten.

“Here's Platten !” was the cry on all sides ; it was well known the mission upon which Platten had been engaged.

“Platten is acting as my second in this duel !” exclaimed the Colonel, by way of excuse, to Falkenberg, as he rose from the table. “Well, Platten, will the fellow fight ?”

“He doesn't flinch, I'll say that for him,” answered Platten.

“Have you made all the arrangements ?”

“ The shore of the Lido ; at daybreak to-morrow.”

“ Excellent ! we shall be in good time for parade afterwards.”

Count Platten’s entrance was quickly followed by that of the Sergeant-Major, who attended for the purpose of announcing to the Colonel that the patrol was about to leave the barracks.

“ As late as that ? ” exclaimed Stettenheim. “ Gentlemen, the Sergeant-Major reminds us of duty—one word before we part. This duel is to the death ; either I or Marco Contarini must fall. I’ll shake each man’s hand.”

They all shook hands with him and bade him adieu, but they had little fear that their champion would be worsted in the encounter.

“ Good-night, Platten ; I shall expect you at four o’clock to-morrow morning ; have a gondola in readiness. I leave everything in your hands.”

Falkenberg was about to withdraw with

the rest. “Come, Baron, you needn’t run away ; if we have been baulked in our whist, we can at least have a quiet game at *écarté*. Pshaw ! this is not the first duel I have fought ; the work I have on hand won’t make me a dull companion, I promise you.”

“Thanks, Colonel ; but I’ve got that spy of mine to look after ; and, pardon me, if I remind you that you have a lady waiting your leisure.”

“I quite forgot it,” answered Stettenheim, with a laugh ; “but nonsense, Baron, a trifle like that needn’t drive you away.”

“You really must excuse me. I shall take advantage of the patrol to reach my own quarters. Farewell.”

“If it must be so, then farewell.”

“Don’t forget your engagement to me for to-morrow evening !” exclaimed Falkenberg, turning back on the threshold ; “half-past nine the General and staff sup with me at the *Café Quadri*.”

“I shall be with you, Baron, life permitting.”

“Your life is safe enough with such an antagonist,” answered Falkenberg, with a sneer. “By the way, you will have to pass my quarters; call in for me at a quarter to nine.”

“Good,” answered Stettenheim, and Falkenberg departed, leaving the Colonel alone with the veiled stranger.

Although a duel was on the *tapis*, there was much mirth among the young subalterns as they crowded out of the Colonel’s chamber. “*Gaudeamus*” had a verse fitting for the occasion, and derisive snatches of chorus were borne down the long stone corridor. “*Vivant omnes virgines*,” young and lovely, of course. “*Vivant et mulieres* ;” it was in truth the very song for an earthly paradise, only death sat piping an obligato accompaniment: “*Nos habebit humus*.”

Stettenheim, without noticing the woman, proceeded with studied unconcern to the table at the end of the chamber, and having selected a cigar, and lighted it with great

care, he threw himself at perfect ease into an arm-chair.

“Well, my girl, I’m at your service.”

In answer to his summons, the woman advanced a few steps towards him with trembling gait.

Ere this, he had not been even at the pains to look at her; but a moment’s glance revealed the beauty of her form and struck him with admiration.

“A charming figure!” he exclaimed, with sudden enthusiasm; “if the face is only half as lovely,” and he gazed at her as a man might gaze on the perfect symmetry of a horse.

“Come, throw off that veil, and let’s see the face;” and his gaze was an insult, and the woman felt that her beauty was degradation. With trembling fingers and almost involuntary action, she obeyed his command and drew aside the veil, and Vittoria Contarini stood before the Austrian officer in all her beauty of form and face, with down-cast eyes and countenance flushed with

shame and indignation ; and he, lolling insolently in his chair, gazed shamelessly on her beauty.

I have said she might have sat to Bonifazio, aye, or to those greater masters, Titian and Veronese, and they would have delighted to paint her face, worthy of their highest intellectual efforts—clothing her fair form in those rich Venetian tissues, and those mysteries of light and shade, and that golden glow of their wondrous power.

Still sitting, he let her stand before him, and eagerly drank in her beauty. “ By my soul, a lovely face ! ” he murmured ; “ eyes with passion lulled to rest, and lips—full lips—and blushes, too—blushes in a barrack ! Oh, wondrous gift to have retained the power of blushing ! ”

His loathsome admiration and the bitterness of his badinage, nerved her at last—falling back apace, she drew herself up to her full height, and with her countenance full of dignity and pride and indignation, she met his gaze, face to face, unflinchingly.

“Sir, I am the Countess Vittoria Contarini.”

He was utterly taken aback—confused; but far less by the announcement of her name, than by the nobility of her presence—it needed no name, indeed, to tell him that he was sitting in the presence of a lady. He arose, stammering some excuse, and offered her a chair—she declined his offered with dignified gesture. He had met many women ere this, and he thought he had fathomed the mystery of woman’s nature; but he only knew women in their degradation—proud, it may be, insolent and domineering, but still degraded—he had never yet met a woman in all her grandeur and purity. He felt she was different from all other women he had ever met, but *how* different, he had yet to learn; and he little deemed that in this knowledge she was destined to be his teacher.

“Allow me, madam, to offer a thousand apologies for the rudeness of your reception. For the honour of our service, I pray you to

believe me, that if I had had the slightest conception it was a lady who sought this interview—but you entered wholly unannounced."

"I acquit you of all blame," she answered, accepting the *amende* with quiet dignity. "But these are officers' quarters; I did not dare to announce my name." She felt the change in his bearing and demeanour, which her assumption of dignity had wrought; but if a thought of exultation flashed through her mind, it was quickly effaced by the recollection of the supreme purpose which had led her in her hopeless despair to seek such an interview. Her voice and countenance quickly revealed the anxiety of her heart.

"I know what I risk in coming here—the bitterness of scandal—contempt of the world—scorn of my own countrymen—hatred of my family; they would kill me if they knew it; but I am ready to bear all shame, endure all scorn—only grant the prayer I make; spare my brother when he stands before you to-morrow."

The woman was at his mercy ; her countenance was one to which emotion lent fresh and varied interest ; he was at least resolved to enjoy this revelation of beauty to the utmost bound.

“ Madam, a duel is the fortune of war,” he answered, with affected coldness.

“ Nay, in this case, the certainty of death,” she exclaimed, with increased agitation. “ How should a mere boy meet you ? Is he a foeman worthy of your steel ? Have mercy on me,” she prayed piteously ; “ it is a sister who prays this mercy.”

“ The military code of Austria,” he rejoined. “ I have no freedom in this matter.”

“ Does that code counsel you to kill a boy ? Is that a law for brave men ? ”

There was a tone of sarcasm in her voice. He was at a loss for a reply. With a shrug of the shoulders and an ejaculation, “ Well, well,” he turned away.

“ No, answer me,” she cried. “ I appeal from a conventional law to the noblest feeling of your heart. Nay, do not turn away

—look me in the face, and tell me that this is a law for brave men.” He had meant to revel in her beauty, and she was challenging him to look upon her face.

“He might avoid this duel,” he answered with embarrassed air. “An apology, even—and yet I know not that I dare accept an apology.”

“He dare not make one,” she rejoined. “I have striven for it, but it was in vain. His honour is too deeply pledged with his own countrymen. He can die, but a coward he cannot be.”

This answer relieved him from his dilemma.

“Well, madam, what would you have me do?”

“Spare him. You are master of your weapon—a flesh wound, not death.”

“Impossible!” he answered.

“Impossible!” she cried, in a voice of anguish. “No, not that word—that word of misery. His death is mine; have mercy on a woman. Nay, take your triumph, if you will; tell the world that a Venetian

girl, the daughter of the proud house of Contarini, humbled herself before the Austrian officer, and begged her brother's life ; and that he, touched by her abject misery, granted her prayer."

"Madam, it cannot be. Nay, I do pity you. I would do all in my power to help you ; but the Secret Society of Venice has rendered all forbearance on my part impossible. Their act, not my will, binds me to this work. A threat of death by the dagger hangs over my head, if harm befall your brother. Mark me, if I spare his life, I stand before my comrades as a coward awed by a company of miserable assassins. I dare not flinch ; I am forced in very honour to defy this threat. This duel must be to the death."

"Oh misery !" she exclaimed ; "what is this you tell me ?"

"Here's the letter, madam—read it ;" and he placed the threatening letter in her hand.

Dazed and bewildered, scarcely knowing

what she uttered, she exclaimed at a moment's glance: "Count Grimani's writing. This, then, was the meaning of his promise."

He caught at her words. "His promise!" he exclaimed; "you have seen Count Grimani lately, then? His promise! Doubtless you are aware of the lurking-place of this arch-conspirator? By my soul, if Baron Falkenberg had the slightest suspicion of this!—"

Terrified at the admission she had made, she threw herself in an agony of fear at Stettenheim's feet.

"Have mercy on me, he is my affianced husband; do not make me his betrayer."

The woman was at his feet; but he had only conquered her through the very superiority of his vantage ground. As she knelt to him in her misery and tears, he rapidly reviewed the situation. He was resolved to win her—he was resolved to make this Venetian girl, with her beauty and her grandeur, the crowning triumph of

his life. Not a single point must be thrown away.

“Rise, madam,” he said with the utmost courtesy. “I am a soldier, not a police-agent—have no fear. Those random words which you have uttered are safe with me. On my honour, I will not betray you.”

“How can I find words of gratitude?” she answered, and tears of gratitude stood in her eyes. He thought he had made a master-stroke by this manifestation of generosity; he little guessed the use to which her noble nature would turn it.

“I will plead no longer,” she exclaimed, with an expression of heartfelt relief. “I have learnt the nobleness and generosity of your nature. I know my brother’s life *is* safe; you are a soldier and a gentleman—a murderer you cannot be.”

“You honour me too much;” he protested, with a sense of shame at his heart.

“I hold to my faith,” she answered, with thorough confidence.

“Well, well—as far as I dare promise——”

“I ask no pledge, Colonel Von Stettenheim. I will not bind you by a promise; better than all words, I have learnt the nobleness of your character. I came here broken-hearted, I go in peace.”

She turned to leave the room, drawing the mantilla close over her face. When they stood on equal terms, the superiority remained with her; could he deny the generosity which she had in her own nobleness of heart imputed to him?

“This girl absolutely makes a fool of me,” he muttered.

Before reaching the door, she turned, and with sudden impulse hurried up to him, and clasping his hand, pressed it to her lips!—many a shameless kiss, but this was a kiss of honour. Again she left him without uttering a word; she was about to enter the corridor, but at the threshold she uttered a cry of alarm, and once more flew to his side, clinging for protection to his arm.

“Save me, save me!” she cried, in agitated voice.

Baron Falkenberg, in a state of great excitement, followed by Grimani, hurried into the room.

“By all the saints, Stettenheim, it’s reported that that fellow Grimani is secreted in these very barracks.”

“It’s a fact, Colonel,” exclaimed Grimani, throwing back his cowl.

Colonel von Stettenheim considered that the presence of Baron Falkenberg was quite sufficient to account for Vittoria’s alarm.

CHAPTER V.

THE AUSTRIAN COLONEL INTERVENES.

VITTORIA regained her home in safety, her incognito preserved. She had been conducted to her gondola by Colonel von Stettenheim. As he led her down the long corridors she had clung to him in trepidation—the terror of Grimani's presence had converted him into a friend; strange, indeed, that she should thus cling for protection to the very man whose insult had occasioned all her woe. He was playing a deep game of finesse, and his natural *bonhomie* and his tone of high breeding and gallant bearing strengthened his hands. He treated her with the utmost respect; or,

rather, he exhibited towards her that easy, natural manner, marking perfect equality, with which a gentleman addresses a lady. He pressed her hand, and renewed his promise when she entered the gondola.

Well, he had promised that no harm should befall Marco, and he had saved her, unconsciously indeed, from the terrible consequences of discovery by her affianced husband: for these mercies at least her heart might justly beat with gratitude. She fell musing over that assuring expression of his handsome features, when he raised her from the ground, and declared that he would not betray her to Baron Falkenberg. What harm thus to muse? She was a Venetian, he was an Austrian; they were wide asunder as pole from pole—but harm or not, that expression of his face was graven on her memory. With musing came exultation; her beauty—and in their self-communings women do not deny the truth on that point—her commanding presence and stateliness, had manifestly had

their worth in the eyes of a man, who was said by popular report to be sated by woman's charms. She felt the triumph of the interview had been with her. But, alas, with exultation, and, indeed, through the very fervour of exultation, came rapid revulsion of feeling. As the vital force which had supported her during the ordeal of the interview gradually ebbed away, chill doubt took possession of her soul.

She had determined to see her brother in the morning before he left the house. Her painful anxiety would not allow her to close her eyes: she stole into Marco's room and watched him as he slept, and, fostered by the cold night air, the dead silence of the house, and her own bodily weakness and fatigue, the doubts assumed terrible proportions. All faith in Stettenheim's promise died away; the remembrance of his insulting gaze, and her own sickening feeling of shame, wholly veiled the bright impression of his countenance. The man was well known to be a reckless libertine, a despiser

of women and woman's honour, and she had been dreaming in her foolish fancy that she, a woman—and he must have met hundreds of women quite as fair—had touched that man's better feelings, and evoked generosity from a purely selfish heart. Her recent faith looked utterly futile and inadequate; she had been fool enough to trust her brother's life to this straw of hope; she had been contemptible enough in her miserable vanity, to rejoice in the thought of her own beauty, while her face ought to have burnt with the crimson of shame and a loathing sense of self-degradation.

A feeling of utter loneliness crept upon her. Hour by hour the great clock of St. Mark's Place announced the progress of the night. She must never reveal to a living soul the wild folly she had committed in risking an interview with the Austrian. Even Marco, who loved her best, would hate her, nay, almost kill her for that compromising act. "If some one would only love me," she murmured in her wretched-

ness, “even for a very short time, I could die happy.” She tried to think of the mother she could scarcely recollect, but the thought was too vague for consolation. Love and help were far away in heaven—and in her weakness, gazing forth at the stars, heaven seemed very far away—too far for her poor, weak prayers to reach, and she felt too weak of soul even to frame a prayer. “Our Lady must come down and seek me; I cannot seek Her.” Time dragged thus painfully through the night; at last the hour arrived at which Marco ought to be aroused. Pietro had had strict orders, but Pietro was snoring away in his distant chamber, with his lies and treachery for a pillow. Marco was sleeping soundly; so calmly and quietly, indeed, that he scarcely appeared to breathe. How could she awake him? What, her voice arouse him to meet death? Impossible! She hung over his pillow anxiously, waiting for Pietro to give the summons. As she gazed upon the sleeper, the quiet sleep seemed to grow still

more quiet, until it became in her distempered gaze as quiet as the sleep of death. He was lying on that bed, as he might lie there lifeless in the next short hour or two. She could bear the sight no longer; she must see him move; she must break the horrible spell. "Marco!" she cried; "dearest Marco!" He started at her voice, gazing on her in the dazed manner of awakened sleep; but she could not bear to speak to him. She fled to her own room, locked the door, and threw herself upon her bed.

It all passed like a dreadful nightmare. She tried not to listen, but her ears were very quick to hear—Pietro's shuffling step in the passage—Count Salvetti's arrival—Marco's step as he approached her room. "Farewell, darling sister, keep a good heart." She could not answer him. She heard his departing step, Count Salvetti's whispered tones, and a chill feeling at her heart told her they had left the house. How long she remained lying down, whether it was sleep or insensibility from exhaustion,

she could not tell. She regained her consciousness, and then some vague terror seemed to fill the room. She started from her bed, and hurried from her chamber into the great saloon; if haply she might find her father, even the harsh voice of chiding and rebuke, was better than the misery of solitude.

As she entered the saloon, the level rays of dawn were pouring through the window.

“ Oh, hateful sun ! ” she cried ; “ lighting the road to death. They meet on that very shore of the Lido where he and I have played together so often. Oh, Marco ! dearest Marco ! I would sell my heart’s blood to save your life, and yet I am forced to remain here in helpless agony and watch the dawn of this terrible day. Death seems to lurk about my footsteps. I must have some living being to cling to, some blessed word of comfort and support.”

Count Contarini presently entered the saloon ; he also had passed a sleepless night,

and, like his daughter, had been unable to summon courage to see Marco.

“Oh, my father!” exclaimed Vittoria, as she approached him with a heart languishing for love and sympathy, but with timid, uncertain step.

He checked her approach with cold gesture.

“Has he gone, Vittoria?”

“He has,” she answered simply. “I watched at his bedside all night; he slept quite calmly. Count Salvetti came here at four o’clock; they left together.”

“Enough, Vittoria; you can leave me.”

She lingered with a sorrowful, scared look.

“You hear me,” he continued harshly. “I wish to be alone.”

“Oh, let me remain with you,” she exclaimed in beseeching tones. “Chide me as you will, but do not drive me from your presence. Oh, not now; now that the terrible moments have arrived; now that, may be, they stand face to face. Oh, give me one word of sympathy.”

“Sympathy!” he answered. “How can I give you sympathy? You, the unfortunate cause of this misery.”

“Oh, but innocent,” she exclaimed.

“The cause, I say.”

“Have mercy! if you knew how dear he is to me, how much I love him.”

“Love him,” rejoined her father in a tone of contempt. “What can you do to show your love?”

What could she do? She had indeed done all she could—risked her fair repute, risked insult and even outrage, and in her utter hopelessness she felt the result was nought.

“Tell me,” continued her father, bitterly, “can your love for him turn this Austrian from his thirst for blood?”

“No, it cannot,” she answered in desponding tone; “it cannot; you are right. I can do nothing.” She shrunk away from him, but he allowed her to remain in the room: there was mercy at least in that; and awaiting the end for weal or woe, father and daughter sat in silence.

She felt they had returned long before voices were audible, but she lacked courage to move from her chair. At last her father caught the sound of voices.

“They have come back—it must be all over,” he exclaimed; and trembling with emotion, he rose from his chair. She flew to his side.

“That’s Count Salvetti’s voice,” she murmured, and advanced towards the door; but with a sudden access of terror she flew back to her father’s side, and clasped her hands over her face. How terrible might be the sight which would meet her eyes!

The door opened, Marco entered. “Vittoria!” he cried, and her brother stood before her without the slightest scratch of injury. With a shriek of joy she flew to meet him, but before she met him a new impulse flashed into her mind. She fell on her knees and burst into tears. Yes, the mercy she could not seek had come unsought. The unasked boon had been granted; not through the glow of faith and

the ardour of prayer, but amid anguish of heart and the chill of doubt and depression, the Mother of all Mercy had descended to her succour. “ Oh, miracle wrought for me ! ” she exclaimed ; “ and I so faithless all the while. Oh, blessed Mary ! pardon those wicked doubts, pardon these prayerless lips, pardon this dead faith.” And then she arose and threw her arms round Marco’s neck, and kissed him fervently. “ Oh, Marco ! this is a blessed end ; back safe to us once more.”

Brother and sister stood locked in one another’s arms, while Count Contarini inquired of his son the particulars of the duel. Vittoria was so absorbed in the thought of her brother’s safety, that for a while his narrative scarcely reached her ears ; but her interest was suddenly aroused by the mention of Stettenheim’s name.

“ We stood face to face,” said Marco.

“ And how did he bear himself, this Austrian ? ” inquired Contarini.

“ As we crossed our swords he seemed

nervous, strangely moved," answered Marco.

"Strangely moved!" exclaimed Vittoria, unconsciously disengaging herself from her brother's arms.

"To my surprise," continued Marco, "he appeared to lack all skill with his weapon; his guard was feeble."

"Feeble!" she echoed, with surprise.

"At the fourth thrust I broke through his guard."

"Well—yes," she cried, with intense interest.

"I wounded him."

"Wounded him!" she exclaimed, in a voice of anguish. "Wounded him!" and she shrunk away from Marco with a shudder.

"Yes, wounded him, I say. I drew that cursed Austrian blood."

"But not fatally, Marco, not fatally?"

"No, it was only his sword arm."

"Oh, Heaven be thanked!" she cried, with a sigh of relief. "Not fatally then—

not fatally?" she reiterated, with the deepest anxiety.

"A mere trifle, I tell you; but it stopped the duel." Marco was irritated by his sister's strange manner. "What is the meaning of this exhibition of emotion?"

"Nothing, nothing," she answered. "Your safety, Marco, your safety. Oh, if you knew how much I have suffered for your sake, you would forgive my weakness." But her anxiety required fresh assurance. "Not severely hurt, you say; only a slight wound?"

"Yes, I repeat, only a slight wound;" and Marco turned from her with impatient gesture.

"Don't be angry with me, Marco; I can't bear to think of blood being shed."

"You show strange tenderness for the few drops this Austrian bully has lost," exclaimed Count Contarini, in a tone of irritation and displeasure; and he marked his displeasure, by withdrawing with his son to another part of the chamber.

“Oh, precious blood!” she murmured; “blood of that noble heart which I have wronged with doubt. Ah, Colonel von Stettenheim, you have nobly kept your pledge.” And tears came into her eyes, and once more, and now undimmed by doubt, the recollection of that handsome face in all its nobleness of expression filled her mind. She felt, and the feeling was mingled with alarm, that this man, whose introduction to her had been through an insult, was intervening betwixt her heart and its old affections; that for the time, at least, he was standing between her heart and the brother she loved so well. This game of hearts was somewhat akin to a game of chess, when the game is played by opponents who are separated by distance. He had sworn to win her, and she little knew the skill and finesse of her antagonist; each move a deep calculation; yet on the whole the game was fairly matched, for with all his experience, he had yet to learn how strong a woman is in the strength of purity and innocence.

Without waiting for the usual signal, Grimani suddenly entered from the secret panel. He hurried up to Marco and laid his hand approvingly on the young man's shoulder.

"Bravely done, Marco. I know all that has occurred. You have upheld the honour of Venice. Worthy of his name," he continued, addressing Contarini. "Worthy of his family, worthy of Italy."

He then passed on to Vittoria, who, with the thought of the Austrian in her heart, trembled guiltily at his presence.

"Ah, Vittoria, I have kept my promise."

"Kept your promise?" she exclaimed, scarcely for the moment understanding the significance of his words.

"Has Marco received any hurt?" he asked, in a low tone.

"No," she answered.

"I have saved his life. Hush! it's as well to let that boy think that he conquered the Austrian; but it was I who held back Stettenheim's arm. I who paralysed his power and skill."

“ You ? ” she muttered involuntarily.

“ I tell you I did it. I had awed Stettenheim with the threat of death. In abject fear he did not dare to strike. I knew the fellow was an arrant coward.”

“ A coward, no ! ” she exclaimed, in all the fervour of her heart. She would have given worlds to have been able to vindicate the Colonel’s character from this mean aspersion ; but the expression on Grimani’s face gave her timely warning. “ At least, the world declares that Colonel vot Stettenheim is a brave soldier,” she added, in timid apology.

“ Let the world hold to that belief,” he answered, with a sneer. “ We two at least know the truth.” He mistook her trepidation for coldness ; she was about to turn from him.

“ Oh, Vittoria ! ” he exclaimed, reproachfully ; “ have I not earned my reward ? Where is this affection so warmly promised ? ‘ Oh, Carlo, if you save his life I shall love you so.’ I *have* saved his life, even at the

risk of my own. Does your heart make no response?" He might have kissed her, though the recollection of the Austrian flashed into her mind; but he sought a gift, and not a permission; he was too proud for that, and he entirely misunderstood the motive of her coldness.

" Still dead and cold," he muttered. " I understand; the old insult rankles in your bosom. That kiss still smarts upon the lips: be it so. I will win your proud heart with ample vengeance, be assured of that."

" No, no," she cried, in alarm; " not vengeance. I require no vengeance. I was foolishly excited at the time; besides, the insult is now atoned by blood."

" But not of my shedding," he answered. " No, Vittoria, I have been forced to stoop very low—to bend to meanness and deceit; but I have sworn *myself* to avenge that insult. This very night I shall keep my word. Enough now,—my visit here concerns your father and brother. Count

Contarini—Marco, I am the bearer of an important communication.”

“One moment,” exclaimed Marco; “I have forgotten to secure the door.”

“It is needless,” answered Grimani.

“But Pietro?”

“Have no fear,” continued Grimani. “Indeed, I need his presence: by your permission I will summon him;” and he struck on the hand bell.

“What does this mean?” inquired Contarini, with astonishment.

“It means that I dare once more be Count Grimani—that I dare cast off the spy’s disguise—that I dare face a treacherous cur like Pietro openly and without fear. I do this under the shelter of your roof—in a few hours more I shall be free to do it in the streets of Venice. Pietro comes.”

Pietro shuffled into the room; he gazed suspiciously around; when his eyes fell on Grimani, an expression of surprise and fear darted into his face. He edged backwards

towards the door, but the recollection that he had closed it on entering checked his movement.

“ You rang, signor,” he said, addressing his master with evident alarm and distrust.

“ That gentleman,” answered Contarini, pointing to Grimani, “ requires your services.”

“ Signor ! ” gasped Pietro, bowing to Grimani.

“ My name is Count Grimani ; you are well acquainted, I believe, with one Father Onofrio, a spy. Well, Pietro, Father Onofrio has kept his promise—ten thousand florins, Pietro—ten thousand florins ! ”

Pietro was thunderstruck for the moment. When he regained his senses he made a sudden dash towards the balcony, but Grimani covered him with a pistol.

“ One inch further, Pietro, and you die.”

Vittoria averted her face, and Pietro, terror-stricken, fell on his knees, praying for mercy.

“ Do not harm him ! ” pleaded Vittoria.

“Harm him, no!” answered Grimani. “He is reserved for a traitor’s death. Your help, Marco;” and the two men rushed on Pietro, forced handcuffs upon him, tied his legs, and thrust a gag into his mouth. “We are quite safe,” observed Grimani, with a dry chuckle, when the operation was satisfactorily concluded. “Falkenberg will leave us at peace; I’ve arranged matters with him. He is to wait for a signal from Pietro, so I fear his patience will be sorely tried. Now for my mission.”

“But the scoundrel can hear,” interposed Contarini.

“The sharper punishment,” answered Grimani, vindictively. “The knowledge he would have sold to the Austrians will be poured into his ears, but his reward will be death, not gold. I warned you yesterday, Contarini, to be prepared for a rising;” and then, turning proudly to his betrothed, “Ah, Vittoria, rejoice with me, the dagger is cast away; once more we may grasp the sword of honour. The Secret Society has

decreed a rising *en masse* against the Austrians this very night."

Her brother Marco, with the impetuosity of youth, cried, "Bravo, noble Italy—free and undivided!" And she, too, was in the very heyday of life's enthusiasm; but not a word of joy could she utter. Well, the prayer of her girlish heart, the long prayer of years, was answered at last. To-night, the post of danger might be hers—to-night, she might load the musket and pile the barricade, and seek the death she had coveted—her life-blood bravely shed for the love of Venice, and her soul at peace for evermore; but the thought which had risen between her and her brother and her betrothed, rose between her heart and her patriotism. Oh, bitter mockery of an earnest hope and a fervent prayer—an enemy, and, worst of all, an Austrian, had utterly paralyzed the great purpose of her life. She could only find words for protest.

"A rising *en masse*! Oh, useless blood-shed!"

“No,” replied Grimani; “Venice will be free!”

“Free! Crushed beneath the Austrian guns.”

“Have faith,” answered her betrothed, greatly marvelling at her expression of fear. “By to-morrow’s dawn the fleet of Italy will be at anchor in the waters of the Republic. In twenty-four hours Cialdini will enter Venice.”

“But the Austrian garrison?” she asked eagerly.

“Baron Falkenberg has delivered it into our hands. This evening he gives a grand entertainment to the Austrian generals and staff at the Café Quadri.”

“The Café Quadri?” she exclaimed with dismay, for she remembered Falkenberg’s invitation to Stettenheim.

“Yes, the Café Quadri. At a given signal we surround the house, and behold, in a moment, the brain of the Austrian force is paralysed. In default of leaders, the Croats and disaffected Hungarians will fall away like sheep.”

“But these officers will resist,” she urged with desperation.

“The worse for them,” rejoined Grimani, sternly. “They will die to a man.”

“To a man!” she echoed in blank despair.

“To a man!” reiterated Grimani. “The web is woven—none can escape.” He turned from her, and his manner shewed deep contempt. “Count Contarini,” he continued, “the Secret Society places you in command of the third section of the National force. Marco, you are entrusted with the fourth; the old instructions stand good. At a quarter to nine o’clock you must lounge into the Café Florian; the piazza will be gradually filled with a crowd of persons, as usual, languid with the day’s heat, eager to enjoy the cool evening breeze and the glorious moonlight; as the bell of St. Mark’s strikes the half-hour, this random crowd will become as if by magic an organized force. You will immediately assume your command.”

Undaunted by Grimani's contempt, Vittoria made a vain effort to divert her father from the enterprise.

"The scheme is so rash, so hopeless," she urged. "A terrible presentiment tells me it must fail."

Her father, though pained, merely attributed her words to woman's fear and weakness.

"I have sworn implicit obedience to the commands of the Secret Society; I must obey!" he answered decisively.

She then turned to her brother as a last hope.

"Dear Marco! do not go; the plot must end in utter failure—death to all concerned."

Marco was absolutely aghast at her words. She had, as a mere child, been the first to evoke his sense of patriotism. They had so often talked together of this coming combat. She had sworn to stand side by side with him, wherever danger was most threatening. He spoke to her with contempt, and almost abhorrence.

“ You are strangely changed, Vittoria—in days past I have seen you weep, that, woman as you are, your arm was powerless to fight for Venice; and now you strive to turn us from the goal of freedom.”

But the severest rebuke came from Count Grimani.

“ My old comrade, I pity you,” he exclaimed, addressing Contarini, “ and you too, Marco. I had imaged a noble example in this daughter of your house,—courage—endurance—undying faith in the destinies of Venice. I dare not go forth to wrestle with death, bearing in my bosom the image of a craven heart. My hand will be powerless to strike, while burdened with this token of miserable cowardice.” He drew the ring of betrothal from his finger. “ I cast it from me—henceforth we are strangers,” and he flung the ring to the ground.

The bond was broken between them. The disgrace and shame were hers; but mingled with the shame was the thought of the Austrian Colonel.

“Grimani!” protested Count Contarini, with astonishment and pride; and Marco’s blood fired up.

“Count Grimani, recollect she is my sister; this act of yours dishonours us and our family.”

Grimani answered the protest with calm deliberation. “Marco, condemn me if you will, but condemn me by the strength of your own conscience. You shall be Count Grimani for the nonce—pick up that ring, I say, place it on *your* finger, and then I will wear it on mine.”

Marco answered the challenge with a deep sigh. That sigh declared the freedom of her hand from henceforth, and it also sealed her shame in the eyes of father and brother. She cowered away and sank into a chair. She seemed to have forfeited the honours of her birthright, and yet the old enthusiasms still dwelt in her soul; but the thought of that man who had dealt so generously with her, lying murdered at the ghastly banquet, mastered every other feeling.

Pietro had to be disposed of before the departure of Grimani.

“I had almost forgotten that reptile,” exclaimed Grimani; “he would be safely stowed in that *oubliette* beneath the lower corridor.”

“How can he be conveyed there?” objected Contarini; “the people who inhabit the water story constantly pass to and fro.”

“You must watch the entrance,” exclaimed Grimani with ready suggestion. “Marco must contrive to raise the stone slab, we can then drag him down the panel stairs. I will watch here—quickly, time presses, I have many arrangements to effect ere night.”

Marco and his father hastened to obey these directions; Grimani remained watching Pietro, who shivered with terror beneath his gaze. Nor was Vittoria less moved as she furtively regarded Grimani’s hard, relentless features. She trembled to think what those hands of his were destined to do

that very evening. “If I could but warn Colonel von Stettenheim to stay away from this fearful banquet! No, a warning to him might raise a suspicion among the Austrians—a clue to the discovery of the plot. Alas! he must die; generous and noble as he is, his life must not weigh against the chances of this enterprise—a father’s, a brother’s life: he must die.” She buried her face in her hands, and they were quickly wet with tears.

Marco hurried into the room. “Grimani!” he exclaimed, “I cannot raise the slab. I dare not call my father from his post.”

“You watch here, I’ll go,” rejoined Grimani.

“One man’s strength is not sufficient; the fastenings are rusted.”

“I *must* try,” persisted Grimani; “we dare not leave him here.”

“It’s useless for one man, I tell you.”

“Then there’s only one method left,” exclaimed Grimani, cocking his pistol.

“Come, Pietro, short shrift and speedy death—prepare to die;” and Grimani pointed his pistol at the spy’s head.

“Hold!” exclaimed Vittoria, starting from her chair. “I will watch him.”

“You?” rejoined Grimani, in a tone of contempt.

“Yes, craven as I am,” she answered—“if he move, he dies. I have fired many a pistol; or, if need be, my fingers would grapple at his throat. Marco knows I’m strong enough.”

Grimani cast a glance at the miserable quivering old man lying helpless at his feet, handcuffed and bound; and then he turned to the woman whose hand he had discarded, and beheld her animated once more by all her grandeur and force.

There seemed no danger in confiding the charge, all-important as it was, to her keeping: Judith could have been trusted, and Vittoria inspired a like confidence—it was somewhat of an *amende*, too, for what had passed, for even in the hour of a great

enterprise, a man might well feel a regret at having thrown away such a pearl of womanhood.

“We can trust her,” exclaimed Marco, with confidence; but Grimani did not require any assurance: he placed the pistol in Vittoria’s hand, and, followed by Marco, left the room.

She stood for the moment irresolute—she then knelt at Pietro’s side, and drew the gag from his mouth.

“If you raise your voice you die,” she whispered. “Tell me how I can communicate with Colonel von Stettenheim?”

“I will be your messenger,” he muttered, gasping with the pain of the gag.

“Fool!” she exclaimed; “don’t trifle with me. I have saved your life now, if you are faithful I will strive to save it hereafter. How can I send a note to Colonel von Stettenheim?”

“At a wave of the hand a gondola will shoot beneath the balcony; drop your letter—it will be safely conveyed to the Colonel.”

“Enough,” she answered, and quickly seating herself at the writing-table, with the pistol laid close to her hand, and facing Pietro, so that the slightest movement on his part without detection was impossible, she wrote with rapid pen a note to the Austrian Colonel. She folded the letter hurriedly, and, melting the sealing-wax took up a large seal close at hand.

“Why, the crest will betray you,” muttered Pietro.

“True,” and she felt for a seal in her dress.

“There’s a ring on my finger,” suggested Pietro: he raised his handcuffed hands towards her and stretched out the finger which bore Falkenberg’s signet. In her anxiety she pressed the melted wax on the letter to Pietro’s proffered seal, and quickly concealed the letter in her bosom. Grimani and Marco re-entered the room immediately afterwards.

“I have not failed,” she exclaimed; I surrender my charge:” and she returned the pistol to Grimani.

“But the gag?” he asked.

“He was stifled; I removed it for the moment,” she answered. And then, as if to avoid any further conversation with Grimani, she retired to the balcony.

“Ah, you scoundrel!” exclaimed Grimani, seizing the gag; “I had forgotten that ring:” and he drew it from Pietro’s finger.

“You *had* forgotten it,” muttered Pietro, “but I hadn’t, brother spy.”

“Silence, you wretch!” and Grimani again thrust the gag into Pietro’s mouth.

“Now, Marco!” and Grimani and Marco dragged Pietro through the panel.

As soon as she was alone, Vittoria waved her hand from the balcony—a gondola, which was in waiting, quickly shot beneath: she threw down the letter, and staggered back into the room.

“Saved! saved!” she cried—“till all danger be over, he will be safe here with me.”

Colonel von Stettenheim had indeed calculated upon receiving a letter from Vittoria

Contarini ; but he little witted how wonderfully fortune had favoured him—how kith and kin, and a strange force of circumstances had conspired together to place the woman he sought in his power.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT SHE WROTE, AND WHAT HE READ.

PIETRO had astutely believed, that the letter, bearing the impression of Baron Falkenberg's seal, would have been promptly conveyed to the police bureau—but the spy employed was not a man of quick perception. He had, moreover, been once snobbishly informed, by a petulant superior officer, as a reward for an act of *trop de zèle*, that he was not paid for thinking; thenceforward he had sulkily forsaken thought, and stuck to the letter of his instructions. He had been instructed to wait for a seal ring, and come what might, for a seal ring he did stolidly determine to wait. However,

as there was manifest profit to be made out of the delivery of a letter from a Venetian lady to an Austrian Colonel, the note was duly despatched to its destination by the hand of a friendly comrade; but with regard to Grimani's scheme for his own detection, Falkenberg waited impatiently for his ring, the spy waited impatiently for Pietro's signet, and Pietro, shivering with fear and cold, waited impatiently for deliverance from a dank and dark cell, covered by a neatly fitting stone slab. But although plots failed, the Colonel received his note safely, and paid handsomely for the delivery.

If the recollection of his countenance was impressed upon Vittoria's memory—the recollection of her beauty and grandeur of aspect was equally impressed upon his. Her recollection, however, was only vivid because it was associated with the thought of devotion and self-sacrifice, because the face of her memory bore the impress of a noble heart. But what mattered a woman's heart or soul to him? a woman's beauty

was all he cared for. Still, there was undoubtedly fresh zest in the thought that this Venetian girl, even as a suppliant, with her fair fame and honour wholly at his mercy, had dealt with him as no woman with the vantage ground on her own side had ever dealt before. She had clasped his hand and kissed it with fervour; she had clung to him with almost convulsive grasp, —but a strange spell seemed to clothe her with protection. The further she advanced in her fearless freedom, the further back did he feel constrained to retire. Of course he was ignorant of the full force of the motives by which she was actuated; but this ignorance only served to increase his marvel, and the more he thought the matter over, the more perplexed did he become. He fondly believed that he had succeeded in summing up the character of women, into two or three convenient cynical aphorisms; and behold, this Venetian girl afforded new experiences, which declined to dovetail with the old definitions. A good deal of mental

distress always arises when an old faith is shaken, when a dawning sense of fallibility shakes the old pride of infallibility. He smoked vigorously, but this aid to logic did not help to repair his shattered theories. He knew he might calculate upon her writing to him ; and if the old foundations of his philosophy had not been rudely disturbed, he could have anticipated, if not the very words, at least the purport of the expected letter.

His wound in the arm was not very painful, stiff rather than painful—he was a consummate master of his weapon, and it was as easy for him to receive Marco's thrust at a given point, as it would have been to have wounded Marco. He had certainly not miscalculated the value of this wound in the eyes of the woman he sought to win.

The letter arrived—his heart beat with curiosity and interest. Little witting the significance of the seal, he tore open the envelope and anxiously scanned the con-

tents. He could scarcely resist laughing—it was the old, old story; his cynical philosophy was reinstated, his new doubts entirely dissipated—behold, he had conquered again as he had conquered before—she had been to see him, she had seen him, she was vanquished. He had foolishly misconstrued her manner, mistaking an idiosyncrasy for a new factor in the philosophy of woman. But misconstruction was impossible now,—the letter prayed him to pay her a secret visit at nine o'clock in the evening, and then there was the postscript which contained the real pith of the letter—“my maid will admit you at the small door on the canal—we shall be alone—they will be away at the Café Florian.” Ah, if he could but have guessed the trepidation with which those words were penned—the desperate fear lest he should hesitate to visit a Venetian house, unless his safety was amply assured. Well, the adventure had lost half its allurement in his eyes—if it had not been for the

triumph of winning a Venetian woman in the face of national hatred and deep-rooted antipathy—a triumph which no Austrian in the annals of love had yet enjoyed—he would have given up the adventure, and Vittoria might have waited in vain, for the coming of this *enfant gâté* of woman's smiles, as many a woman had been compelled to wait before.

Whilst he thought of her with light contempt and linked her name with degradation, she was praying to Heaven for his life with earnest prayer. She had racked her brain to devise some plan for his escape from the coming carnage—she had prepared a disguise and secreted it in her own chamber. There was desperate risk in all this—but beyond the risk there was something still more terrible—shame and humiliation. She had been forced to make her own waiting-woman a confidant. Not a confidant in the truth—to have revealed the truth with all its generous and noble intention to this woman, would have been

to endanger not only the life of father and brother, but the very success of the plot. It was a confidence necessarily involving a declaration of infamy—the words were wrung out of her mouth half unawares; their full purport was only revealed to her by the woman's surprised and significant look. "What," said the woman, "an Austrian officer conveyed secretly into the house, and she was to watch lest they should be disturbed." Vittoria beheld with sickening feeling the damning inference written in the woman's face—the woman's smile growing into a hideous leer—and the blood of outraged modesty mantled her face, and shuddering with a supreme sense of shame, her lips sealed against all power of refutation, she well-nigh faltered in her generous project. But her innocence and her purity upheld her. In her own conscience she stood acquitted of all evil, and the generosity of her heart rebuked her, that in the fear of *false* shame she should allow the man, who had risked his life for

her sake, to be cruelly murdered. So she silently accepted the imputation of disgrace, and delivered over her fair fame to the woman to deal with scornfully, and she bought the woman's fidelity by the gift of the few jewels she possessed. Thus on the very day which should have been the triumph of her life, when pride, and honour, and patriotism should have upheld her in a glorious struggle for Venetian freedom, that day was a day of shame and humiliation and self-sacrifice, and this sore abasement was endured for the sake of a man who was lolling at his ease, and amid whiffs of smoke and cynical thoughts, triumphantly exulting in the thought of her degradation.

CHAPTER VII.

GRIMANI FORGETS VENICE.

It was Grimani's purpose not to lose sight of Falkenberg until he had seen him fully installed in his duties of host at the Café Quadri. There was a certain inconvenience in this course, inasmuch as Grimani's presence was required at fifty other points of difficulty ; still, the paramount necessity of watching Falkenberg's movements outweighed every other consideration. So Grimani, in his Franciscan garb, sat, as was his wont, in the Baron's bureau and watched with sarcastic exultation, the irritation and petulance of his Austrian employer. Falkenberg's anxiety would not allow of his sitting ; he paced up and down

the chamber with a nervous hurried step. There was something particularly fascinating to Grimani, in the thought that he was insensibly leading his antagonist to his doom,—that the required signal lay safely secreted in his own pocket, within a few yards of Falkenberg's eager clutch. Falkenberg was fast attaining a mood with which it was dangerous to trifle—ever and anon he turned savagely on Grimani—he was beginning to lose his faith in the new spy, and indeed nothing but Grimani's calm impassioned manner prevented him from giving vent to his fury.

Grimani treated the Austrian as if he had been a fractious child.

“Have a little patience, can't you?—I have sworn, and I swear again, that this evening you shall meet Grimani face to face.”

“You've sworn that fifty times,” was Falkenberg's rejoinder.

“Is the oath broken yet?” asked Grimani calmly.

“Has my signet ring arrived—the signal you promised?”

“Am I Pietro?”

“Don’t bandy words with me,” exclaimed Falkenberg, giving way at last to his anger. “I begin to suspect your honesty and good faith—we two don’t part company until Grimani is secured.”

“My word on that,” answered Grimani quietly.

“Your word! I’ll have better security,” and Falkenberg struck his bell. An usher entered.

“Let that man be secured—handcuffs!” and Falkenberg pointed to Grimani. The usher gave a signal, and two of the secret police entered the room.

“Handcuffs!” cried Grimani with a scornful laugh. “What! handcuffs for a man who is forced to cling to you for very life?”

“Handcuffs,” answered Falkenberg, “because it’s death, not life, if you are false.”

“Then handcuffs by all means, if you

want that assurance," and with an air of bravado Grimani thrust his hands forward to the man who approached him, and allowed the irons to be placed on his wrists without the slightest resistance.

"So far good," continued Falkenberg; "if we secure Grimani this evening, you shall receive the ten thousand florins and my apology,—if not, then at twelve o'clock a file of soldiers and death as a spy."

"I accept the terms," answered Grimani; "we shall all find death a sure paymaster," and he threw himself defiantly into a chair.

Colonel von Stettenheim was announced. He entered the room in a bright jaunty manner. He was dressed, as of course the occasion required, in full uniform, and right handsome did he look, with a buoyant smile of triumph lighting up his features. His right arm was carried in a sling, but it was evident from the free use he made of his arm, that the sling was scarcely needful.

"Delighted to see you," exclaimed Falk-

enberg, assuming a cheerful air; "punctuality itself. "I shall be at your service in a few minutes."

"I regret to say, Baron, that I have only kept my engagement to break it."

"What's this mystery?" inquired Falkenberg.

"You must excuse my joining your party this evening."

"But you were undoubtedly engaged to me, Colonel?"

"The fact is,"—said Stettenheim with a smile.

"Come, come, no excuses about prior engagements——"

"I can't in honour say it was a prior engagement," rejoined Stettenheim significantly.

"Well then," answered Falkenberg, "you belong to me; I claim you against the world."

"But not against a lady—I must be frank with you, a lady has commanded my presence this evening."

“A trifle of that sort to weigh against a supper with good friends?”

“Well, Falkenberg, you know I’m not given to bravado, but I will boast now —a Venetian lady has commanded my presence.”

Grimani was listening intently to the conversation, though to outward appearance absorbed in his own thoughts; he started up from his chair at Stettenheim’s last words.

“A Venetian lady command the presence of an Austrian! impossible!” exclaimed Falkenberg.

“I tell you, the lady is a proud Venetian, and a violent patriot to boot,—hates Austria as only women can hate.”

“A strange story!” muttered Falkenberg, incredulously.

“My word for it,” rejoined Stettenheim.

“Your word is amply sufficient,” rejoined Falkenberg, courteously. “But in very faith, Colonel, I should have doubted my own eyes even if they had read the invitation.”

“Pshaw! I have the note here,” and Stettenheim, drawing Vittoria’s letter from his uniform, waved it with exultation.

A sickening feeling of dire presentiment stole over Grimani as he watched the Austrian Colonel.

“And what does the fair lady say?” inquired Falkenberg with an affected air of gallantry. He felt, indeed, no interest in the love side of the question, but all intelligence concerning the Venetians served for fish in the police net.

“The usual sort of letter,” answered Stettenheim; “vehement words which admit of but one construction,” and taking the letter from the envelope, he glanced over it with an air of triumph.

“And the fair one’s name?” asked Falkenberg, “if I may be pardoned for such curiosity.”

“The name is sacred,” rejoined Stettenheim curtly; “the name is for me alone.”

Falkenberg accepted the rebuke with a bow of acquiescence.

“Behold how love triumphs where statesmen fail,” exclaimed Stettenheim in a tone of banter. “No statesmanship could have placed me *en rapport* with a fair Venetian.—Change your policy, Falkenberg; convert your spies into lovers, and you’ll learn every secret.” He turned at the moment and caught sight of Grimani. “For instance, your grim Franciscan yonder—dress him up for a lover!—What! in durance vile, my man?—but I never meddle with affairs of state,” and turning again to Falkenberg, “Come, if I can’t give you names, I may at least describe form and face.”

“I shall be delighted,” exclaimed Falkenberg, and he gave a secret sign to Grimani to listen—but Grimani required no such injunction.

“By my soul,” continued Stettenheim, “it’s hard to find words when you want to describe a woman’s face. Do you care for pictures, Falkenberg?”

“So, so,” replied Falkenberg, with a

shrug of the shoulders. "I can't say I'm a connoisseur."

"'So, so,' is about the limit of my artistic knowledge," rejoined Stettenheim; "but I do care for lovely faces—those old Venetians had the knack of painting. Gad, sir, they could paint flesh and blood and give it the breath of life! When I've looked at their women on the canvas, I've always said to myself *that* loveliness must once have been a reality, and not a mere creature of brush and palette. Well, the old art has died out, they say; but the chain of beauty can't be broken. Depend upon it, I've argued, they are somewhere hidden away, those fair faces and those splendid forms, somewhere in those musty old palaces with their pride, and their poverty, and their patriotism. Egad, I was right! Last evening one of these Venetian beauties stood before me, a living woman, as she might have stood before Titian's easel in the old days—golden hair, and the grand eyes, and the pride of noble birth. It's a return visit this even-

ing, Falkenberg! give me your congratulations. Bless me, what's come to the monk?" he exclaimed, as his eye fell on Grimani.

Grimani had sunk to his knees, his wrists were spasmodically grinding at the iron fetters, big drops of sweat stood on his brow —his appearance was, in short, that of a man in a fit; but the cause was overwhelming emotion, which could find no vent in action, and it well-nigh strangled him. The envelope of Vittoria's letter had fallen to the floor, and Grimani had beheld what in his eyes was the damning proof of Vittoria's shame, and the terrible explanation of her strange conduct—the girl's betrayer stood before him, and his hands were powerless to strike the blow of vengeance.

" You had better have the fellow looked to, Falkenberg," observed Stettenheim in kindly tone.

" He'll come to presently," rejoined Falkenberg with careless unconcern. " By the way, you mustn't do me the injustice of

supposing that I asked the lady's name out of mere curiosity—but remember, there are such things as snares for fine birds."

"I have perfect faith in the lady's sincerity," rejoined Stettenheim.

"Well, keep this charming engagement, by all means; but, at least, give such information as will enable me, under all chances, to provide for your safety."

"My safety is my sword," replied Stettenheim with proud confidence; "but stronger than all weapons, my safety is a woman's love. Farewell, Baron; a thousand apologies for a broken engagement."

As Stettenheim left the room, Grimani struggled to his feet, and almost involuntarily strove to follow the Colonel; his movement was arrested by Falkenberg.

"What's the game you are playing now?" he asked suspiciously.

"Game!" cried Grimani, struggling for utterance. "Game of life! surround the Palazzo Contarini—quick! no time to be lost. Smash in the doors; it's life or death."

“Heyday, man, has the signal arrived?” exclaimed Falkenberg, surprised by this sudden outburst.

“A man’s life,” rejoined Grimani hoarsely—his self-possession had deserted him, and he scarcely knew what he was saying in the terrible fear that possessed him.

“What does the man mean?” asked Falkenberg, somewhat bewildered.

“It’s a snare—that letter to Colonel von Stettenheim,” gasped Grimani.

“The lady’s name?” demanded Falkenberg.

Grimani hesitated for a moment—but he was forced to reveal the truth and all its shame.

“Vittoria Contarini—I know the handwriting,” and he gave the envelope to Falkenberg.

Falkenberg glanced at it for a moment, and fell into a coarse laugh, which pierced Grimani to the quick.

“What, the girl our gallant Colonel kissed the other evening? Impossible!”

“I tell you it’s the truth,” and Grimani writhed as he uttered the words. “No time to be lost, I say—surround the house. The man will be murdered by the Contarini; it’s a lure and snare out of vengeance for that insult.”

“We must be calm, Onofrio,” observed Falkenberg quietly. “At least, I must be so, for your head seems to have entirely deserted you. You appear to take a vast deal of interest in Colonel von Stettenheim,” and indeed Falkenberg was very greatly perplexed as to the cause of Grimani’s emotion.

“Can’t you see—don’t you understand?” urged Grimani, almost driven to his wit’s end, and speaking with rapid utterance—“they will all be at home now—Grimani will be there, he is her betrothed—depend upon it, he has his part to play in this vengeance—throw your net quickly, and catch them all.”

“So, your theory is that that letter is a snare;” and Falkenberg deliberately weighed

the question in his mind. "Of course, if your theory be correct, a rapid cast of the net, and we do secure the cursed brood."

"I'll lead the men," cried Grimani panting with anxiety—"there's a secret panel—a panel passage to the great saloon—let them hold a pistol to my head,—shoot me, if I fail."

"That word 'fail,' is an awkward word," rejoined Falkenberg quietly, "you see if I accept your proposal, I should run the chance of losing you, and not gaining Grimani—a double loss. No, on mature consideration, I elect to wait for Pietro's signal—it's always dangerous to alter a scheme in the midst of its execution. Patience, Onofrio, patience! You see, having regard to the Colonel's confident manner, I don't think we have any just cause for assuming the existence of a snare. It seems to me far more reasonable to admit the perfect good faith of the lady in question—remember, she has already visited the Colonel in his quarters—indeed, the

probabilities are manifestly in favour of a period having been carefully selected for this interview, during which the various members of the family would be absent from home. I see by your impatient manner that you don't accept my argument—I am sorry for it—reason is on my side, warped judgment, I don't know what or how, on yours." And Falkenberg authoritatively closed the discussion.

In his agony of impotence, and every word that Falkenberg had uttered was a stab, Grimani's senses seemed to fail him; his plausibility and ingenuity of device and suggestion, to which he had ere this trusted so implicitly for safety, had entirely deserted him—his brain was maddened by jealousy, and rage, and horrible apprehension—he grovelled helplessly at Falkenberg's feet, and begged and prayed in incoherent words, that the Palazzo Contarini might be instantly surrounded, broken into, searched.

So on the very threshold of a great enterprise, at the very hour which bore full

promise of the realization of a great hope, and the all absorbing purpose of a life,—was Grimani vanquished and cast down by the overwhelming powers of love. Falkenberg, in his heartless way, had pity for him—he attributed his strange conduct to the failure of courage at the close approach of death.

It was now full time for the Baron to repair to the Café Quadri, and receive his guests. He summoned his deputy, and gave implicit injunctions for immediate attention to be paid to Pietro's signal on its arrival, and he also ordered Grimani to be detained and closely watched, by two of the most trusty members of the secret police. "I shall return, Onofrio, at a quarter to twelve o'clock—pray Heaven I may be able to give you good quittance." Falkenberg departed with the envelope of Vittoria's letter in his pocket, and the purpose in his mind of diverting his guests, the comrades of Stettenheim, with a pleasant tale of scandal, and all its conco-

mitants of light laughter and jeers, and coarse badinage; it was in truth the very story, to lend zest to the sparkle of champagne, and give brightness and animation to a feast of men.

As soon as Falkenberg had left, Grimani strove with intense effort to regain the due balance of his mind—to search for that happy expedient, which at other periods of danger had been ever wont to flash into his mind unsought, but his burning heart had dried up the old sources of inspiration. He tried to bribe the two men who guarded him, but it was all in vain—they utterly scouted his offers, in truth how should a miserable spy be able to pay in gold?

One last desperate chance remained—the chance of life or death—gold was powerless, but fear might be potent. He ordered the men who watched him to close the doors with care—not a soul other than themselves must hear what he was about to reveal—he spoke in such a voice of command, that they involuntarily obeyed him. They drew close to him to listen to his words.

“You scoundrels!” he cried,—“false sons of Venice as you are, here’s gold for you, ten thousand florins !”

“Where ?” they asked with a jeer, thinking his brain was touched.

“Here, fools—in your grasp—tear the beard from my face, and you’ll find it.” They fell back from him covering him with their revolvers—handcuffed as he was, they were awed by his desperate looks. He suddenly tore the monk’s beard from his chin, and the false-shaven crown from his head. They started in terror when they beheld his natural countenance.

“You curs, you may well slink away,—I am Count Grimani, head of the Secret Society in Venice !” He looked at the men with his keen searching eyes, their eyes cowered beneath the force of his—he felt he had gained his point.

“Seize me, take the money—and *die* to-morrow—remember whoever injures me—aye, but a hair of my head—there are fifty daggers sworn to the work of vengeance—

go where you will, this earth is broad enough, but the daggers will travel till they reach your hearts, England, America, Australia, where you will." The men stood silent and irresolute.

"Make your choice quickly,—my freedom, or gold and sure death. In another minute I shall shout aloud that Count Grimani is in this room—it will be your death warrant when I do."

The men were utterly cowed by Grimani's dauntless bearing, and the terror of his threat.

"I give you one minute to decide—watch the clock."

There was a dead silence in the room.

One of the men stepped forward, threw down his revolver, and unclasped the handcuffs. Grimani was free !

CHAPTER VIII.

VITTORIA'S TRIUMPH.

THE outcome of a few faltering syllables may form the shaping of a life—the supreme moment may steal upon us unawares and unsuspected ; nay, the mere inflexions of a voice, may seal a future for weal or woe—not in power and strength, but like a thief in the night, in the midst of depression, and weakness, and doubt, that moment may arrive. And then too, we may have greatly erred as to the venue of our battle—we may have carefully surveyed all the probable localities, and raised sure ramparts and a strong citadel of refuge, and lo ! the attack falls on the very points that lack all defence

—the open country, without a foot of vantage, and worse even than this, the citadel may have been already mined and captured, while our best forces are striving desperately to hold the outer lines.

As we have seen, the anticipated battle ground of Vittoria's life, had been the battle ground of Venetian freedom ; and woman as she was, she had armed herself at all points for this work, but she was not destined to fight that fight, and yet, strangely enough, the fight she had to fight was to be fought at the very time, when she believed that the fortunes of Venice were in the scale. Further than this, although she knew it not, her heart had been already vanquished by the Austrian Colonel—her reason said No—her reason utterly scouted any idea of the sort, her reason said the man was naught to her—he was an Austrian, he belonged to the hated race—the act she proposed doing was an act of pure generosity, the mere payment of a debt it would be base to leave unpaid—a life saved, for a

life given. It is true her reason did not assert itself very loudly, she was too weak and weary to reflect much—it was ordained that the supreme moment of her life should come upon her in the midst of weariness, and weakness, and doubt, and self reproach. Still her early training had not left her without some valuable resources—the subtle power she possessed of concealing her feelings and emotion, was destined to stand her in good stead, to give her a few precious minutes of breathing time and delay, when every minute would be to her the worth of a king's ransom. And finally she was armed with the splendid talisman of purity and innocence—thrice armed, and fearless in that power, of all fear of petty prudery.

What dress to wear? the thought of dress was very sickening, amid the thoughts of death and coming carnage, and yet the query had to be answered—the part *must* be played out, the part of a lady sitting as of ordinary custom, in her own drawing-room on a summer evening. Marietta exulted

in her task of tire woman, the thought of her mistress's degradation, was a pleasant apology for many sore and secret sins of her own. She had drawn forth from the old carved and richly painted coffers, bridal gifts of olden times, costly dresses which became her mistress bravely—rich old silks (those old Venetian fabrics were not woven for one generation) reformed and adapted to modern fashion. Vittoria turned from these dresses with loathing—“a white dress, Marietta—a white dress, I say, quite plain.” The woman wondered much at such a selection. Vittoria closed her eyes as she sat before the glass, while the woman dressed her hair—it was positive torture to catch Marietta’s glances, torture, too, the dreadful time Marietta lingered over her work. She could endure it no longer, she hastily dismissed the woman and burst into tears. “Heaven help me,” she murmured, “I can’t go on with it, it will kill me.—Marco’s gone, and I scarcely kissed him, and my father—shall I ever see them

again ? alas ! they hate and despise me now.” Her eyes fell on the clock, it was already ten minutes to nine. “He may arrive at any moment,” she exclaimed in alarm, “and I’m not ready—these tears will betray everything.” She hastily recalled Marietta, and bade her finish quickly, and she sat down before the glass, and again closed her eyes. When Marietta had finished the task, she glanced at herself in the glass, and felt with dismay that her hair had never been more deftly dressed—that her eyes were more than ever bright, through the pallor of her countenance and the dark lines of languor. Marietta had insidiously plaited a ribbon of Austrian colour into her hair. Her face flushed with indignation when she saw it, “how dare you, Marietta ? take out the wretched thing ! no, no, let it stay—the ribbon is rightly placed—it tells the truth—I’m false now to Venice.”

She entered the great saloon, and dismissed Marietta to watch below. Bright

moonlight streamed into the room ; it was a lovely calm evening, all sounds were hushed, and the city seemed buried in profound repose—an evening of balmy warmth not sultry heat, an evening made for peace and peaceful thoughts,—and the breathing of lover's vows, and those communings of love when silence itself is eloquence. It was strange to gaze on the moonbeams lying on the still waters, and then think of the fierce throbbing of men's pulses, and the fiery thoughts of men's minds—the peace which nature had proclaimed so lovingly, and the fierce strife which men were about to commence. These thoughts passed for a few moments through her mind,—but not the loveliness of Venetian moonlight, nor the majesty of grand old buildings, lighted by that tender light which covers decadence with silver beauty, or relegates it to the merciful keeping of dark shadow—but the progress of minutes on the dial, and the swinging of the pendulum held her mind enthralled.

The great bell of the piazza had struck the hour of nine but he had not come—her heart throbbed with each tick of the clock on the chimney piece, and direful thoughts beset her. What if her letter had failed in reaching its destination ? What if the words of her letter had failed in effecting their purpose ? And the terrible vison rose before her—cruel slaughter, and eyes closed in death. “ Oh, God,” she cried in her despair, “ he will not come; but the precious minutes, his very life blood, hurry away, and then comes death. Oh, horrible thought, in half an hour the fearful work begins. Grimani has sworn that I shall be avenged, and I know too well the strength of that man’s hard relentless nature. Oh, dull words of that letter, weak miserable words which have failed to turn him from his doom ! What, could the burning fervour of a heart, coin no stronger phrases than those I wrote ? Lost ! murdered through the coldness of my warning words. Oh, he must not die. He shall not die. I

will not bear the burden of his generosity on my soul. Shall he give me a life, and I give him nothing in return? Risk nothing to save him from a miserable death? No, no, I'll go and drag him yet from that slaughter-house. He shall give heed to my anxious words." Alas! the danger of going to that *Café Quadri*, the favoured haunt of the Austrian officers, the fearful risk and danger—but she resolved to face it. She turned from the chimney piece for the purpose of ringing the bell on the table to summon *Marietta*. *Stettenheim* had entered the room noiselessly and stood before her. She started with surprise and emotion.

"Fair lady, I have obeyed your charming summons."

"Oh, Heaven be praised," she murmured in fervent tone. "At last! I feared the letter had failed—I was—I—" The intensity of her feelings, and her physical weakness overcame her—her eyes for a few moments lost their power of vision, she tottered towards him with purposeless gait,

and would have fallen, if he had not hurried forward and supported her with his arm—her head fell back on his shoulder and the golden hair brushed his lips.' Her reception and her few words of greeting presaged in his judgment an easy victory—far too easy in truth to render victory a triumph, and as he supported her in his arms, notwithstanding her wealth of beauty, he despised her.

"One moment," she murmured—"I shall be myself again directly. I'm so ashamed of such foolish weakness—I've been so anxious to see you. It's all past now"—as she regained her strength and self-possession she gradually disengaged herself from his support, and drawing back, she addressed him in ordinary tones, and her manner became cold and constrained, in comparison with the fervour of her greeting, but with his experience of women he was perfectly prepared for this change of demeanour.

"Colonel von Stettenheim, I have ven-

tured to request this interview with you. I know that you, at least, will not misunderstand my motives—a sister desires to acknowledge her gratitude for a brother's life."

"Pray let that painful subject be forgotten," he answered.

"Oh, how can I ever forget it?"

"Nay, I pray you——" he exclaimed in voice of expostulation.

"Can I ever forget the cost of this generosity?" she asked. "That wound, alas!"

"A mere chance scratch, I assure you. Not worth a thought."

"Those light words will not deceive me," she rejoined in heartfelt tones, "your arm is in a sling."

"It was needless," he rejoined; "but our regimental surgeon is an old woman. You see I can use my arm perfectly." In a jaunty manner he removed his arm from the sling, and moved it to and fro, but he was careful to let an expression of pain

mark his face, and escape from his lips. His well-calculated deceit was amply rewarded—Vittoria's countenance responded with truest tenderness and sympathy, and tears started into her eyes.

“Oh no, no,—it gives you sad pain, I'm sure it does. Oh, let me—let me—” She took his arm, and with soft sympathetic touch replaced it in the sling—she clasped his hand awhile. “Oh, merciful hand which held back the deadly sword. I can never requite this noble act.”

“Tell me,” he asked, “does your father—your brother, know ought of the truth ?”

“How should I dare to tell them ? If they knew it, if they even suspected it,—I should be utterly lost.”

“They hate me then, as they hate all my race ?”

“Alas !” she answered with sorrowful expression.

“And yet you have ventured to ask me here—to this mansion of your family—where I am regarded as a deadly enemy.”

She thought he looked around him with an air of distrust.

“Oh, have no fear,” she cried in assuring tone. “Think you I would let one hair of your head be injured?—my life first!—They are all away,” she continued with still greater emphasis—“away in the city. They will not return for a long time. Oh, have no fear. My maid, my own foster-sister, watches at the entrance below. You *know* you can trust in me.”

Her feelings from the first moment of the interview, had seemed so pronounced in his favour, that he deemed it the surer course to allow the wooing to come from her, but the earnestness of her last words, and the half assuring and half reproachful expression of her eyes seemed like a challenge to his gallantry. He answered her in far warmer tones than he had yet ventured to employ. “Oh, sweet girl! it needs no words—no assurance, save the earnest gaze of those dark eyes—I *can* trust in you. By my faith, this meeting is charmingly de-

vised. Shame on me to have dreamt of danger! Here in my lady's bower lives love not fear."

His manner alarmed her, and she started back. "Love," she answered, "don't talk of such an absurdity—it's a great wonder for us to be even friends—recollect I am a Venetian—you are an Austrian——"

"Oh, sweet lady," he cried passionately. "Love's country is the world! bound and barrier sink beneath his sway. Why, sweet one, those snowy Alps would melt in his fervent glow. At this hour Austria and Venice are dead to us—naught lives, but a lover and the lady of his love—the theft of that evening must be the happy gift of this. Dearest girl——" Her heart beat with terror, she could scarcely drag herself away—he seized her hand, and for the moment she lacked the power to wrench it from his grasp.

"Why, how now!" he exclaimed—"this hand—it almost freezes in mine. Why, sweet one, 'tis you who are afraid. Oh,

folly of fear! am I not at your side? A lover and a slave!—still so coy?"

With violent effort she broke away from him, her voice was almost choked with agitation. "Colonel von Stettenheim, this strange language: Oh, if you knew how these words pain me—"

Her indignant protest did not daunt him—"a woman's coyness," he thought—it had stood in his path many a time ere this, and many a time had he vanquished it.

"Why, sweet one," he urged passionately—"none can hear us. I breathe these words in your ear, words for you alone. Why do you tremble? Think you this still calm night has hushed away all sound to play the eavesdropper? Oh, don't let foolish fear break in upon this happy hour."

"For mercy's sake!" she cried, "cease—cease, you have fearfully misunderstood my motives," tears filled her eyes. "I do not deserve this insult at your hands."

Her manner told him that she was ani-

mated by a stronger feeling than mere coyness.

“An insult,” he answered in a tone of affected surprise—“have you forgotten that letter praying me to come here at this hour of the evening?”

“Had I not good cause for writing it?” she answered quickly. “Is every hour of the day at my free disposal?”

“And your eager warm reception,” he continued. “Why your very heart belies these strange cold words—when I entered, it well nigh led you captive to my arms.”

“I was indeed deeply moved,” she replied. “Is it a small thing for a sister to meet the man who has given her a brother’s life?”

“But those luring words,” he urged—“‘they are away, away in the city’—‘they will not return’—‘my maid watches below.’”

“Would you as an Austrian,” she asked in reply, “have dared to enter this house without a complete assurance of your safety?”

He was perplexed and annoyed, and at the same time bewildered by her conduct—but having gained the citadel, it was absolutely too absurd, to be baffled at the very moment of victory by a girl's fear and hesitation.

“Pshaw!” he cried, “this is folly—we dally with rapid time. Oh, Vittoria, the golden moments glide away——” he advanced towards her.

“Do not approach me, one cry of mine——”

“One cry,” he answered; “why, foolish girl, you dare not raise your voice.”

“You are right,” she answered scornfully, “I dare not.”

“The vantage ground is mine,” he cried with passion—“shall a lover forego his triumph? If you raise your voice you are lost.”

He was resolute enough, the thought of a hundred gibes from comrades' lips was urging him on—but he fairly recoiled before her burst of indignation, and the scorn

which flashed from her eyes. “Lost!” she cried, and instead of shrinking away, she advanced towards him with an expression of defiance and contempt. “Lost! oh, worthy boast! What, conqueror of a woman’s confidence? Victor of a woman’s faith? Is this the measure of Austrian chivalry? Is this the treatment that Austrian ladies receive from Austrian gentlemen—are they such scum, your countrywomen, that they endure insults and abasement like this?—women, without the dignity of womanhood, and men, without honour or shame?” She saw he flinched beneath her words, and she revelled for the moment in her triumph. “Be it so! shatter the idol I have raised in my own heart—show me the cowardice and brute force which lie at the core of this broken image—But remember, if I am lost—*your* life pays the forfeit.”

She sought for more words of indignation—more coals of fire to heap on his head—it was needless, Colonel von Stettenheim wisely refrained from all rejoinder. Easy

enough in the heat of passionate indignation, to forget the misery of her position, but when she turned away from the aggressor, she turned to a great blank, and an aching void—a bright ideal had been destroyed, and a devoted purpose had met with a base requital, but her sense of utter loneliness constituted the deepest pain. Neither father, nor brother, nor Venice from henceforth to fill her heart,—and the one desperate thought of new love which had forced itself into her mind, had ended in insult and disgrace ; she knew this Austrian must despise her, and that thought was insupportable to her woman's pride. She threw herself into a chair and burst into tears. “I had little thought of fearing you,” she murmured in mournful tones which touched his heart—“I had pictured to myself a soldier and an enemy—but an enemy brave and generous—I believed I had good cause for such a faith—Through this weary day, I have thought of Chevalier Bayard, ‘*sans peur et sans reproche*.’ I knew that woman’s

honour had been sacred in his hands. I had not thought that a sister's gratitude meant a sister's degradation." To his honour be it said, he felt that he had deeply erred—worse than an error even, he had made a serious blunder—his contempt had now given place to admiration—for the first time in his life he had met with a woman *worth* loving—but the evil path he had chosen, had led him too far astray to give any present hope of reconciliation, his wisest course was manifestly an immediate withdrawal, together with the best *amende* his tongue could frame.

"Madam, I pray your pardon for any random words I may have unfortunately uttered. Believe me, I would not for worlds merit your contempt. I have deeply erred, and I dare not ask for forgiveness. I can only express my sincere regret for the pain I have caused you. I will no longer intrude my presence here. No living soul knows of this visit, and none shall ever know, be assured of that. Your honour *is* sacred in

my hands. One moment,—Maximilian von Stettenheim avows that he is not '*sans reproche*,' but remember, if you ever need his service, he is your friend to death. My gondola waits below. Farewell."

She could not bear to look at him, she kept her face closely buried in her hands while he spoke—but the frank earnestness of his voice, brought back the bright recollection of his countenance vividly into her mind, and with it the thought of his imminent peril. That word "Farewell," sounded like a knell in her ears. "'Farewell,' oh, merciful Heaven, that word means death—death!"—and the recent insult, shameful as it was, paled away in the presence of that awful thought—she had lured him to the place of refuge, and now she was allowing him to go straightway to that slaughter-house.

He had picked up his military cloak, which he had flung off on entering the room, he had adjusted it, and was already standing on the threshold. She started up,

and brushing aside her golden hair which had fallen dishevelled over her face, she advanced towards him.

“Colonel von Stettenheim ! ”

“Madam,” he replied, with a bow of marked politeness.

“One moment,” she gasped—“I have something I wish to say—something—” Oh for thoughts, words—the shaping of some plausible excuse ! but her mind was a hopeless blank.

“I am at your service, madam.”

“It was nothing,” she stammered—“it has escaped my memory for the moment—I shall remember it directly.”

“You must not think me ungallant if I am guilty of saying that time somewhat presses with me—I have a special engagement.”

“An engagement ! ” she echoed mechanically.

“The truth is, I sup with Baron Falkenberg this evening.”

“You sup with Baron Falkenberg ! ” she exclaimed with a shudder.

“Again, madam, farewell;” and with a courtly bow he turned towards the door.

“You cannot go!” she exclaimed with vehemence.

“An engagement,” he protested—he had reached the door. She flew up to him and grasped his hand—“No, no; you cannot go,” she cried in a voice of terror and agitation—“you must stay here—here in this room—here with me.” She thought he still persisted in leaving, with sudden desperation she threw her arms round him, and with sheer effort of strength dragged him back into the room.

“Surely,” he thought with exultation, “this is victory.” He clasped her in his arms, she made no resistance. “What,” he cried, “has the ice melted at last? The latent passion burst into flame? I understand it now, blind fool that I was. Oh, sweet dissembler, the victory was not to be lightly won—a contest and fight. Oh, glorious triumph.” He bent his head and kissed her lips—“These lips are deadly

cold. What, fainted ! fainted in my arms —oh, darling burden ! ” He supported her to a large chair—of course he did not dare to summon help—he thought, however, that Nature would kindly act as a sufficient nurse at such a juncture—and drawing the hair from her face, rippling it fondly through his fingers, he fanned her as she lay insensible, and played with the golden hair.

Well, after all, although there had been great divergencies from the beaten track, this new experience of a woman’s ways squared reasonably enough with his old theories—a little more coyness, or a little less—in the present case, there had been merely an excess of coyness, that was the whole difference—the theories themselves were correct enough, and the victory was at last secure. He watched with rapture the colour gradually returning to her face—and then from her own lips, unloosed now from all trammels of consciousness, he heard, with astonishment and anxiety, the vindication of her honour and purity, in broken and

painful utterances of that thought for his safety, which lay closest to her heart.

“What gone to that banquet!” she murmured—“gone to his death!—have mercy—mercy, Grimani, spare him! Oh, do spare him—if the others must die, save his life. Marietta, where am I?—Marietta! Marietta!” she cried loudly.

“Hush, hush!” he answered—“we shall be overheard. You are here at home—here in your own chamber. I am at your side—Maximilian von Stettenheim.”

She had not entirely recovered her senses, and her face wore that dazed expression of painful waking, which the great Florentine has wrought with supreme power into that countenance of “Night” which keeps ward at the tomb of Julian de Medici.

“You here!—still here,” she murmured, “Oh, Heaven be thanked!” She groped feebly for his hand. “Give me your hand, still here! still here!” she cried in tones of heart-felt relief, and she held his hand fast clasped in hers. In another minute she

recovered her consciousness. But she had the presence of mind to remain perfectly quiet, until she had fully regained her self-possession,—she gazed anxiously at the clock, there still remained ten minutes more of torture and shame, before she would be at liberty to reveal the truth. She withdrew her hand from him, and rose from her chair. “I’ve quite recovered—quite well. How stupid I am, pray pardon me—but, indeed, I’ve endured so much anxiety lately.” And then in changed tone, with affected unconcern, “Oh, I remember, you said you had an engagement to sup with Baron Falkenberg. I recollect now, he asked you last night.”

“But why should I not keep this engagement?”

“Why—why? I know not,” she answered with some confusion. “Why, you are my guest now, Colonel von Stettenheim,” she continued archly. “A Venetian lady bids you welcome to her house. What, is Baron Falkenberg’s company preferable

to mine? Would your ladies at Vienna accept such an excuse? Pray be seated, be seated—" she threw herself with careless ease into a chair.

" Those words——"

" What words?" she inquired with surprise.

" You uttered some strange words as you were recovering just now."

" Indeed! did I? What could I have said? I seemed to be in a sort of dream—a feeling of wild confusion."

" Grimani spare him!—if the others must die, spare his life!"

She started with terror at what he told her, but her consummate power of concealing emotion came to her aid, half laughingly she answered " How absurd, surely I could never have talked such wild nonsense."

" My ears were not deceived."

" Well, well—don't be so dreadfully serious about a trifle—if I did make use of those words—it was merely some random

utterance—dreams and faintings—it's the same sort of thing, I suppose, when we regain our consciousness." With a light gesture she dismissed the subject. "Listen!" she exclaimed, "I declare, one can just catch a sound of the band in the piazza—a valse, I'm sure—one of those delicious valses of Strauss. Your military bands are simply perfect. Tell me now," she continued with an arch expression, "I'm so anxious to know the truth—they say your German ladies valse so well, is it really a fact?"

Her manner was so perfectly natural, so bright and unconcerned, that it almost deceived him, and then the fascination of her manner was so potent, it almost drove the ugly words out of his head.

"Come, tell me first what those words mean, and then I'll tell you about the German ladies."

"Still harping on the old string," she replied with a laugh. "Nonsense, nonsense! How can one explain nonsense?"

“I must keep my engagement then ! ” He was regarding her with close scrutiny, and he observed that she started slightly at his words ; she quickly recovered herself, however, and replied in her brightest manner.

“Allow me to observe that a banquet of gentlemen is a very poor excuse for saying farewell to a lady.”

“You evade my question. You force me to go and learn the meaning of those words.”

She could not conceal a shudder, and he marked it.

“What, you still dare to speak of leaving when a lady bids you remain ? ”

“I am resolved,” he answered firmly.

“But I command ! ” she exclaimed with a bright smile. “This room is my kingdom. I am a despot here ; ” and with a playful affectation of coquetry, she laid her hands on his. “My prisoner, bound by strongest chains, a woman’s will.”

Under other circumstances, with a tenth

part of the effort, she could have held that man enchain'd, a slave at her feet, but she saw with terror, in the expression of his face, that all power of cajolery was at an end.

“No, no, cease these foolish words—farewell!” and he thrust away her hands. Finesse had done its work, for the next few minutes she must retain him as best she might. He was turning to leave her, but she seized his hands again with vehement grasp. “I say you shall not go—you shall not go”—and each word she uttered betrayed her emotion, and justified his suspicions.

“The meaning of those words then?—quick,” he answered roughly.

“Their meaning,—I tell you I know nothing;” she still retained her hold of his hands.

“It's false!” he cried; “the truth breaks upon me, some horrible foul play is about to take place. Let me go, I say, or, by Heaven, woman as you are, I'll strike you

down!" It was no easy effort to release his hands from her determined grasp. After a struggle he shook her off, and then, quick as lightning, she flew to the great door of the saloon, turned the key in the lock, and withdrew it, concealing it in her dress. He followed her to the door.

"Locked," he exclaimed, "the key?"

"I have it," she answered.

"Give it, I say!" but before he could arrest her steps, she had flown to the balcony and flung the key into the canal.

"It has a safer guardian than my weak hands," she answered, with calm resolution; "you cannot leave this room, Colonel von Stettenheim."

"That other door," he exclaimed angrily.

"It leads to my apartments," she rejoined. "The windows are barred. The patricians of Venice guard the honour of their daughters with iron bolts," she added, in a tone of sarcasm.

He was fairly outwitted by a woman, but far worse than that, he was fully convinced

by her conduct, that some terrible catastrophe threatened Baron Falkenberg's banquet. He turned upon her with indignation and fury—fury augmented by her impassive demeanour. “Vile deceiver! murder is on hand, and I am caged here. Trapped by a woman's snare; and those men I love, comrades of the battle-field, threatened with death, basely murdered, struck down by the assassin's blow. What's the danger that threatens that banquet? By Heaven you shall tell me.” In his rage, maddened by those fearful thoughts, he seized her hands fiercely—“Speak, woman, speak, I say, or I'll have you dragged to the common prison, the jailer, and the lash.” He flung her roughly away; she made no answer, but she uttered a low cry of anguish—“The jailer and the lash.” Oh, that that horrible threat should have fallen from the lips of the very man, whose life she was striving to save against overwhelming odds.

“Speak!” he cried, with increased fury at her silence, “speak, I say! Accursed

wretch, to lure me here, and fool away the precious moments—men's life blood—with your lying tricks ! Those assassins at their work ! my voice will be heard from the balcony—an alarm may still be in time.” He turned from her to go to the balcony, but she stopped him.

“ No, no—it's death ! ”

“ Be it death,” he answered.

“ My death as well as yours,” she cried, clinging passionately to him. “ The death of the woman who has risked all to save your life.”

“ Their lives ! their lives, I say,” he could not disengage himself from her grasp, and, in his overwhelming anxiety he dragged her along the floor towards the balcony.

The clock struck the half hour ; at last she was free to speak without being a traitor to the cause of Venice.

“ Hark, the signal ! ” she exclaimed, and she released him from her grasp. “ Venice has risen upon Austria. All's over—for life or death, the work's done. Your voice from

the balcony will be our death, it cannot save their lives. The Café Quadri is surrounded—if they resist, they die."

When he heard her words, he ceased from all further effort—he uttered a deep groan of anguish—the strong man was utterly cast down, she led him unresistingly to a chair, he made no reply to what she had said, he asked her no questions, but she saw how acutely he suffered, as men do suffer who are denied the resource of action, and her own heart bled for his. It was all forgiven now, that last cruel threat, and that shameful insult. His head was bent down, and his face buried in his hands. Oh, that she could have listened to the promptings of her heart. Oh, that it had been her right and her privilege, to have thrown her arms round his neck, and poured loving words of comfort and sympathy into his ear. She could only pray that his life might be spared, and right fervently did she pray.

But time was very precious.

“Colonel von Stettenheim, I have sworn to save your life—I have made every preparation in my power. You will find the dress of a peasant in my room—you must disguise your face. As soon as you are ready, my maid will conduct you to a market boat, which is in readiness to convey you to the mainland. You will then be able to reach the Austrian lines.” He seemed to give no heed to her words. She laid her hand on his shoulder, “No time must be lost, you must take advantage of the confusion in the city—it will aid your escape.”

“Escape? no,” he answered, scarcely raising his head.

“What!” she exclaimed with surprise.

“My comrades slaughtered at that Café Quadri. Let those butchers finish their work here.”

“Merciful Heaven!”

“The better part of my life lies dead with them. There’s but little left for the assassin’s knife.”

“This is madness,” she cried.

"No, despair and shame," he answered in a low tone.

"Be it so," she rejoined calmly, "I too can die. My own kindred will kill me on the moment if you are discovered here." It seemed to her, that it would be better to die with this man, than live on in contempt and desolation—better to die with love, and a noble thought of self-sacrifice in her heart. But a new fear flashed into her mind. "No, she must *not* die," and in words of passionate remonstrance she prayed him to leave her. "No, no, worse than death," she cried—my name blackened with shame—branded with infamy—blotted out from kith and kin. Not death alone, but death and shame! Have mercy on me, if you have none for yourself—go, save me from worse than death."

He rose from his chair, "I yield, madam; farewell." She had saved his life; cold words these for a great gift—but in the thought of murdered comrades, he could not express gratitude for the boon.

“We part to meet no more,” she said in low tremulous tones; “you gave me a life, I have striven to save yours. Would to Heaven I could have saved *their* lives for your sake. The cruel words you have spoken to me, bore the impress of your agony, they are sacred henceforth—more precious to me than all loving words I have ever heard. Farewell for ever. One day,” and she bent her eyes to the ground, “you shall tell the Austrian lady who will be your wife—a Venetian girl saved the life which is to be her happiness and joy.” And then in changed voice, marked with anxiety, “Every moment is dangerous! the disguise, quickly.” She caught with her anxious ears a suspicious sound. “Hush, some one approaches. Merciful Heaven, all is lost—quick, conceal yourself in my room!”

But it was too late; ere he could seek refuge, Grimani had burst in upon them from the panel passage; she uttered a cry of alarm, and flew behind Stettenheim for protection. Stettenheim only needed some

tangible danger to restore his nerve—quick as lightning his sword flashed from its sheath, and the blade arrested Grimani's headlong course. Grimani had a long knife in his grasp, the only weapon he could snatch up in his hurried flight from the police bureau. Stettenheim kept him at bay, but he poured forth words of fury and contempt on Vittoria's head, and she cowered away beneath his scathing denunciation.

“Oh, wretched girl!” he cried, “so this awful shame is the secret of your waning patriotism! In the hour of *our* danger, in the hour of *our* triumph—a lover and an Austrian; this dalliance of infamy—Oh, monstrous disgrace!”

“This lady is innocent—I swear it,” interposed Stettenheim, “by all that is sacred.

“Liar!” rejoined Grimani, “I am Count Grimani! I heard your vile boast to Falkenberg—I was that Franciscan spy you were merciful enough to pity—I was in an agony

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“Death!” exclaimed Marco, and they both drew their revolvers on Stettenheim.

“Stop!” cried Vittoria in loud voice. She started forward, and threw herself in front of Stettenheim, covering him with her body, and stretching out her arms to protect him to the utmost of her power. “Stop, I say, your bullets shall pierce me first—the fault is mine. He came here at my request. Stop I say—if he die, I die too.”

“Oh, fearful words,” exclaimed Count Contarini with a shudder. “She avows her guilt.” His first impulse was to shoot them both down, but—the woman who stood before him in her fearless defiance was his daughter. He paused, and that pause saved their lives. He lowered his own revolver, and stretching out his hand, forced down Marco’s.

“Marco, lay down your weapon. Let the Austrian skulk away—let that woman go to her shame. You have no sister now, Marco—I have no daughter, we have nothing to avenge.”

In the horror of that condemnation, Vittoria, forgetting all else, flew to her father and threw herself at his feet.

“Mercy, mercy—I’m not guilty! I swear it—a few words will tell you all—listen to me, for Heaven’s sake!”

Stettenheim’s safety was in the balance—it had all passed with such bewildering swiftness—he was in the act of springing on his adversaries with his sword, and making the best desperate fight he might against the odds of their firearms, when Vittoria had thrown herself before him—he was at a loss what course to follow under the new aspect of affairs, when suddenly the tramp of soldiers was heard outside the chamber—the large door of the salon was forced in with the leverage of bayonets, and flew open with a crash, the Austrian soldiers, his own men, crowded into the room. The surprise was too sudden to admit of the flight of the three Venetians—indeed a soldier presently emerged from the panel passage. Grimani, Contarini, and Marco, were immediately sur-

rounded and seized, two soldiers also arrested Vittoria. Falkenberg entered immediately after the soldiers.

“For God’s sake, Falkenberg,” exclaimed Stettenheim—“beat the rappel, occupy all the posts in the city—there’s fearful mischief on hand, a conspiracy to slaughter us all! Don’t stop for explanations, give your orders—my word that they are needful.” Falkenberg, impressed by Stettenheim’s manner gave immediate directions to the orderly who followed him. “Now for the prisoners,” he exclaimed—“have we been in time to secure Grimani?”

“Count Grimani is here,” and uttering those words, Grimani stood forward, two soldiers holding his wrists. All attempts at concealment were now in vain, and it only remained for him to yield liberty and life with dignity and manhood.

Falkenberg flew forward, eager to behold the man he had so long sought.

“Good God! Onofrio!”—and Falkenberg started back with astonishment.

“No thanks to your wit that we stand thus, Baron Falkenberg. I don’t ask for mercy—I should have shot you this evening—if a woman’s accursed handiwork had not marred my plans.”

“You obedient servant,” answered Falkenberg with a mock bow—“I am much beholden to this lady—indeed it is solely to her good offices, that I owe the satisfaction, to me, of our present interview. That envelope with the handwriting of the Countess Vittoria Contarini was, in truth, Pietro’s signal.”

Count Contarini and Marco started with horror at this statement.

“You did not observe the seal on the envelope,” continued Falkenberg, still addressing Grimani with affected politeness—“I understand the cause of your emotion now; probably your heart threw your head out of balance—that seal bore the impression of my signet ring—I caught sight of the seal quite by chance as I was about to sit at table—“better late than never,” I exclaimed, “and behold the adage is amply justified.”

“Vittoria’s treachery!” cried Contarini and Marco at a breath. “Oh shame, blackest shame,” exclaimed Contarini in a voice of anguish—a traitress as well as vile.”

Vittoria broke from the soldiers who guarded her, and flew again to her father.

“No, no—I swear by all that’s sacred—there was not one word of treachery in that letter.”

“Away, abandoned wretch,” answered her father with concentrated rage—“do not pollute my sight. Live on in your shame, and bear for evermore a father’s curse upon your brow.” He spurned her from him and she tottered towards Marco.

“Marco,” she cried in piteous tones—“Oh Marco, listen to me—I swear I’m innocent—have mercy—mercy——”

“What!” answered Marco drawing towards her as far as the soldiers would permit him—“you weary of that vile sin, and you would sin no more? A traitress, and you would fain cease to sell Italian men to

Austrian tyrants. Well, I will have mercy—*you shall sin no more*”—with a sudden effort he gained the freedom of his hands, and drawing a dagger flung himself upon her. Stettenheim had fortunately watched, him, and quick as lightning he caught the upraised wrist, and turned the blow aside—but Vittoria sank beneath its force—the last drop of bitter anguish—“Oh, Marco, Marco,—I have loved you so”—and with a heart-broken moan she fell senseless on the floor. Some women who inhabited the water story, had followed the soldiers into the chamber—they gathered round Vittoria, but they afforded her no assistance.

“Remove the prisoners,” exclaimed Falkenberg—“the three men, I mean”—and turning to Vittoria—“Ah, by the way, that woman.” “My word is pledged for her,” answered Stettenheim.

“Ah, Colonel, do not fear that the police will prove your rivals in that quarter,” rejoined Falkenberg with an air of gallantry. The soldiers had formed, and at the com-

mand of Falkenberg, they marched out with their prisoners, Falkenberg following in the rear.

“Has she recovered?” asked Stettenheim of the women—“Why for shame do you let her lie there? Raise her up, and carry her to her chamber.” The women hesitated.

“Obey, I say.”

“Traitor,” answered one of the women—“we will not defile our hands by touching her body—the curse of Venice is on her head.” “The curse of Venice,” echoed the other women, and with one accord, they stole out of the room.

He and she were again alone.

“What,” he cried—“deserted by all, cast out—condemned.” He knelt at her side and tenderly raised her head, she was still insensible—“Noble-hearted girl,” he murmured—he spoke the feelings of his heart though the words were naught to her—“I love you now as I have never loved woman before—Love you with the deepest reverence and highest admiration. Oh, fear

not—there is no taint of dishonour in my words. Vittoria, you have nobly ventured your life and your good name for my sake—I swear I will save the lives of those you love if I give my own for the cost."

Well, she lay there helpless—an outcast from kith and country, with a father's curse—crushed in soul and body; but she had won a great victory—a greater victory than most women ever have the chance of winning—she had converted the love which degrades into the love which exalts—she had been offered the dregs of a sensual heart, and she had raised that heart to her own high estate, evoking the nobler germs, and animating it with chivalry and devotion. She lay helpless in that man's arms, and wholly in his power, but she lay in perfect safety—safe, as if sheltered by a mother's loving care, for in the soul of that man she had rendered womanhood *sacred* for evermore.

CHAPTER IX.

“THEY TWAIN.”

Less than half an hour for the process of conversion, but it was amply sufficient—and it needs a whole night to turn dark hair white. Less than half an hour, to convert a sensual passion into a holy feeling of passionate admiration and deepest reverence. Less than half an hour, for beauty and nobility of soul to outshine beauty of form and countenance. It was so in this instance of love; and theologians tell us it is so in matters of religion—somehow—and the history of conversion is rather the statement of a fact than the *rationale* of a process—the secret spring is

touched, the floodgates are opened, and the new influence pours into the soul. With utter sceptics, so they affirm, or with half-believers, conversion follows the same course—nay, even a minute or a second may be enough to work the marvellous change; that minute or second being, so it is said, the tension point of insensible influences cumulating in the soul.

Given the cynicism, the deep-rooted contempt of women, the selfish sensuality of Maximilian von Stettenheim, at what point of resistance shall we discover the triumphant potency of that “breaking strain” of generosity, of self-sacrifice, of devotion—aye, of proffered sacrifice of life? Was it remorse for having mistaken a holy impulse for a vile passion, when she threw her arms round him and dragged him back into the room?—was it the sense of her noble forgiveness of those bitter words of insult, “the jailer and the lash”?—was it gratitude for the forethought and care with which, at the utmost risk to herself, she

had planned the means of his escape, from what she deemed an inevitable doom?—was it admiration for that undaunted bravery, with which she had interposed at the critical moment between the rage of her father and brother, and sheltered him from their bullets, an act which from fiery Italian natures was almost certain to provoke her own death? Any one of all of these might have been sufficient, but the accumulation of all was irresistible; the old life gave away with a crash, and amid the ruins of cynicism, of heartless contempt, of miserable selfishness, Vittoria Contarini created a new life of nobleness, and devotion, and faith.

The results of sudden conversions are oftentimes still more strange than the rapidity of their cause. It frequently happens that the very plans and grooves of the old life, have to be adapted to the new, and consequently work in a very anomalous manner. It was strangely thus in the case of our hero and heroine; all he

had sought as the realization of his basest desires, had become his undisputed possession. He was perfectly free, as far as outer hindrances were concerned, to cover her lips with fervent kisses as he raised her head in his arms, but her face was now veiled with an impervious veil of sanctity, and her whole form was wrapped in that same veil. He presently discovered, to his great alarm, that blood was oozing slowly from her left side—she must have received some hurt from Marco's averted blow. It was in vain to summon assistance—the women had all left the house, Marietta had fled, the palazzo was deserted by all, save a few of his men who were left on guard. So it fell to him, as a duty, to tear open her dress, to draw aside the coverings from her breast, and staunch for the time, as best he might, the cruel wound—strange work for his hands! As far as he could judge, the wound seemed to be on the surface, a glancing of the dagger; further than this, he only beheld her devotion and her nobleness

—the warp and woof of the sacred veil;—the beauty of her exquisitely-modelled form, which an artist might have worshipped, was veiled by the thickness of that holy veil from his eyes.

From this point commenced the dilemma of the situation in which they were placed. The weight of difficulty fell on his shoulders; her condition was one more or less of insensibility—bodily and mental exhaustion, allowing small power of thought—but mercifully, in so far as she could think at all, she was not tortured by fear or apprehension; she felt, with surest faith, that in the hands of the man for whom she had suffered so much, and whose life she had saved, her honour *must* be as sacred as his own; that he would surely protect and guard her in this dark hour of her life; that he *must* love her now with a love worthy of herself.

This was her feeling—a feeling of perfect assurance—though, of course, not summed up in definite words.

She was thoroughly justified in her faith ; it was, indeed, the jealous thought of her honour and reputation, which perplexed him with sore perplexity. He felt that every moment he remained alone with her was a slur upon her fair fame ; that he ought in justice to leave her forthwith : yet it was equally clear, in the commonest dictates of humanity, that he could not leave her alone in that house, under the protection of soldiers and police agents. Equally clear, also, that she ought to be conveyed to her own chamber ; he could easily have carried her in his arms and laid her on her bed, but he did not dare to enter that room alone with her. As he gazed upon her, he started with horror and disgust, at the thought of the venomous tongues carping at her fair fame—the vile jeers and innuendoes which his protests would be in vain to silence. What was the worth of his word in vindication of a woman's honour ? He, who had derided the bare idea with many a scoff and laugh. Egad, he had his sword, it

should be a fight to the death with the man who dared to breathe one word in her disparagement; and yet, risk his life as he might in her vindication, bully as he might, would that be sufficient to convince the world of her purity and innocence? But thinking, did not solve the difficulty, she must be carried to her chamber. Oh, that his mother or sister had been at hand, that he might have confided her to their care as a sacred charge—that he might have poured forth to the only two beings who would have listened to him with credence, the story of her nobleness, and the story of his new true love. But, again, good wishing could not solve the difficulty. He was at least resolved not to enter her chamber alone with her; he summoned an old soldier into the saloon, a sergeant who belonged to the company he had once held; he had done the man some friendly service, and the man was now to do him a service which, simple as it was, could never be repaid—he was to become the surety of a woman's honour.

Stettenheim raised Vittoria in his arms, and at the same time bade the man raise and support her feet, and they carried her to her room and laid her on her bed. He carefully adjusted her pillow, and drew a coverlid over her, the old soldier standing impassively at his side. She asked for water in a low tone, he raised her up and held the glass for her to drink, and laid her head once more on the pillow, she scarcely heeding his good office, and drew aside the golden hair which covered the pillow with its radiance; and head and hair rested in his hands as sacredly as the fair head of St. Catherine rests in the hands of the angel, in that sweet fresco of the gentle artist Bernardino Luini, in which the saint is borne to her tomb in the arms of angels.

He looked upon her for a few moments with remorseful gaze, the old soldier standing at his side, and tears rose in his eyes at the sight of so much beauty and grandeur wrecked in that stormy contest for his safety, and he murmured, with unac-

customed lips, a short prayer that from Heaven might be vouchsafed to her that love and tenderness of woman which was denied to her on earth.

He left the room with hurried steps, the old soldier following him with greater deliberation. On the very threshold of her chamber he met Falkenberg face to face. The Nemesis of his past life was destined to pursue him with relentless steps. Through many a path of degradation he had, in lightness of heart, dragged women to their shame ; and through such paths was he destined, by the force of inevitable circumstances, to drag the woman he worshipped and revered—destined by his own acts to heap obloquy and shame upon her head—destined to writhe helplessly beneath the imputations cast upon her.

He shrank with disgust from the cynical smile on Falkenberg's countenance. Thank Heaven, the old soldier was behind him. He pointed to the man as he emerged from the doorway.

“We have conveyed the Countess Vittoria Contarini to her room,” he said; and he marked the sentence with an emphasis on the “we.”

“One pair of arms might have sufficed for the conveyance of such a burden to such a bourn,” rejoined Falkenberg with a jeer.

Stettenheim mastered his rising indignation. “What are the orders, Falkenberg?”

“Your regiment is to hold the fort and act as a reserve. I’ve just seen the General, but I’ve assured him that as we hold the head and chief of the conspiracy, a rising need not be apprehended. By the way, I mentioned that at my request you had occupied the Palazzo Contarini with a company of your men, being the first soldiers I could lay hands on. So the little escapade with the fair Countess is sufficiently excused by the plea of military service. I am now here to superintend a thorough search of the premises. When we have finished our task, you are to with-

draw your men, as the General considers that the troops had better be concentrated on the appointed positions."

Falkenberg spoke in a jaunty, triumphant manner. The fact was, before he had left the palazzo with the prisoners, he had succeeded in unearthing Pietro, and had learnt, with terror and dismay, the full extent and desperate nature of the conspiracy, which was being hatched under his very nose, and in some measure in his own office. But although the Baron was not a man of great capacity, he was not by any means a fool. It was easy enough to affirm, that he had been cognizant of every move in the adverse game from the very first; and he did make this affirmation with great effrontery and success.

"It is scarcely possible to tell the truth without some appearance of bravado," said Falkenberg, with an assumed air of self-depreciation; "but the fact is, every staff officer here in Venice owes his life this evening to me. The General has in the

handsomest manner recognized the service which my bureau has rendered to the Empire. You would scarcely believe, Stettenheim, that I have retained that scoundrel Grimani as a spy in my pay—*my* pay, mind—for the last two months ; it's almost incredible, isn't it ? ”

“ It is,” rejoined Stettenheim, but he scarcely heeded Falkenberg’s words, for all his thoughts were centred in Vittoria’s safety.

“ At any moment during the last two months,” continued Falkenberg, “ I could have laid my hands on that arch conspirator —cat and mouse, hey ? ”

“ Why the deuce didn’t you open your claws sooner, instead of running matters so confoundedly close ? ”

“ Why didn’t I ? ” rejoined Falkenberg, with a smile of contempt. “ Why, because I wanted evidence—incontrovertible evidence, mind you ; nothing less would do. Years ago we were free to whip off people at pleasure and lock them up for life, evidence

or no evidence ; but in these days, that infernal English press is always down upon us, for what it is pleased to call acts of arbitrary despotism, and then all Europe sets up a howl. I don't hesitate to affirm, on the strength of my reputation as an official—and I may, I hope, add, a statesman—that the English press, with its absurd cant about liberty of the subject, has rendered the art of government fifty per cent. more difficult throughout Europe. Evidence, hey?—according to their wonderful legal system which favours conspirators and cut-throats—— Come, I can give them evidence now—and that evidence will be the death of Count Grimani, and the death of the two Contarini to boot."

"Hush, man," exclaimed Stettenheim with anxiety ; "that poor girl in the next room, remember."

"I beg pardon," answered Falkenberg with a slight sneer, "I was thinking of state policy, not women. Well, and what do you mean to do with this fair lady ? "

“Place her under the care of some of her countrywomen.”

“Easier said than done,” rejoined Falkenberg, “unless you are already weary, and want to be quickly rid of her. Why, the city is in a ferment—they would tear her to pieces; she must be guarded by soldiers; I’m half afraid even the sight of her may provoke an *émeute*. Egad, that kiss of yours is likely to become a state matter, before we arrive at the end of the sequences: the cry is, she has sacrificed her honour to the Austrian officer.”

“It’s a lie!” exclaimed Stettenheim, with an outburst of rage.

“Be calm, I beg,” rejoined Falkenberg; “I’m merely informing you as to the outside cry. Her honour, they say, and her country, as well.”

“Neither, neither,” protested Stettenheim with fervour. “Neither, I swear by all that’s sacred—the purest and noblest woman that ever lived—and true to Venice as well. She asked me here to save my life. It

was I, to my shame, who mistook her motive."

"I am, of course, bound to accept your word," answered Falkenberg with a perceptible smile of incredulity, "but I tell you, the life of Vittoria Contarini is not worth five minutes' purchase in Venetian hands."

Falkenberg turned aside to speak to one of his men, who had entered the saloon.

Stettenheim was fast falling into despair; he racked his brains to discover some honourable asylum for the woman he revered and loved—some place of safety from the rage of her countrymen. Was there any Austrian lady in Venice under whose care she could be placed? Alas, with scarcely any exception, all the Austrian ladies, the wives of the officers and government officials, had, in the serious aspect of political affairs, returned to Germany. Stettenheim suddenly remembered a rumour that the Baroness Falkenberg had delayed her departure. In the Baroness, therefore, was centered his last hope of finding a

German lady to befriend Vittoria. It was not a very bright hope—Baroness Falkenberg was more famed for a fierce assertion of virtue, than for amiability of disposition, or charity of spirit. Added to this, Stettenheim had often cast stones of derision at the immaculate reputation of the Baroness, and it was quite possible that some of these missiles had wounded the lady's *amour propre*.

“Well, Stettenheim,” said Falkenberg, after dismissing his officer, “as far as we are concerned, our work is finished. Pietro has shown my men every hole and corner where documentary evidence might be found. We have made one or two small discoveries; I did not expect to find much, for the secret society is cunning enough to work by oral communications. We are ready, therefore, to retire as soon as it suits you to give the order to the soldiers—the sooner the better, as the General is evidently anxious about the concentration of the troops.”

“ But that girl,” murmured Stettenheim.

“ I really can’t advise,” answered Falkenberg drily.

“ She can’t be left here, you say ? ”

“ She can’t be left with safety in the hands of the Venetians.”

“ Every Austrian lady with whom I am well acquainted has left Venice,” exclaimed Stettenheim ; “ I must throw myself on your kindness and generosity—I must ask you and the Baroness Falkenberg to give an asylum for this night at least to that poor girl.”

“ Heavens, sir ! ” exclaimed Falkenberg with indignation, “ do you mean to insult my wife ? ”

“ I swear she is innocent,” answered Stettenheim very humbly. “ For mercy’s sake, have some compassion for me ! I have assured you how utterly I misunderstood the purport of that letter ; it was written in fervent anxiety to save my life, and my life she has positively saved ; have compassion on us both. Remember, if she

lives, she will one day become my wife. Can I give better proof of her innocence and her honour ? ”

“ Let me tell you, Colonel von Stettenheim,” said Falkenberg, endeavouring to control his irritation, “ that I have no desire to quarrel with you about a love affair, and I very emphatically protest against a quarrel being fastened upon me, at a period when my mind is burdened with a hundred State anxieties and responsibilities; but I tell you plainly, the Countess Vittoria Contarini shall not enter the presence of my wife. Scarcely two hours ago, you informed me with all possible significance, that this was a return visit—you told me to congratulate you on your triumph over the virtue of a Venetian lady, and now you calmly ask me to introduce this very lady to my wife ! I confess, I do not understand this sort of conduct.”

“ I have given my word for her innocence,” protested Stettenheim in a tone of despair.

“Your word for a woman’s honour!” rejoined Falkenberg, infusing as much sarcasm as he dared into his voice. “Well, I have accepted it—I am bound to accept the word of an officer and a gentleman, but more than that I am not bound to do, and more than that I will not do. I wait for your command to the soldiers,” he added, with official punctilio; “your escort is necessary for our safety.”

So all hope of refuge at the hands of Falkenberg was at an end. The field of choice was growing very narrow; from the Venetians, scorn, contempt, and death—from his own compatriots, scorn and contempt. Two asylums only offered themselves—both safe as regarded personal safety, but in one alone would her fair fame be secure; it was a hard choice to make, but the last consideration was paramount—a prison. The cruel threat of his anger was now forced upon him by his despair—her honour would at least be secured by iron bars.

“ Baron Falkenberg, you have refused all friendly help to this poor girl.”

“ We have fully discussed that point, sir,” interrupted Falkenberg.

“ I cease to address you as a friend,” continued Stettenheim; “ I address you as an official of the Empire. I denounce the Countess Vittoria Contarini as an aider and abettor of this conspiracy against Austrian authority.”

“ What do you say ? ” exclaimed Falkenberg with astonishment.

“ I denounce the Countess Vittoria Contarini ! ”

“ This woman that you—pardon me.” A threatening glance from Stettenheim cut short Falkenberg’s words.

“ Do your duty, sir—arrest her ! ”

“ What evidence ? ” exclaimed Falkenberg.

“ At the proper time I shall be able to prove cognizance and complicity.”

“ Egad ! ” exclaimed Falkenberg, “ if I had my will, some of these fine lady conspirators should smart for it.”

Stettenheim shuddered at Falkenberg's words. "No violence," he exclaimed, losing all self-control, "or, by God——"

"Spare your threats, sir—that cursed English press——"

"Thank God for it!" rejoined Stettenheim. "Arrest her, I say—her life will be safe in a prison; ill use her, you dare not."

"I understand you at last," exclaimed Falkenberg with a sneer. "So—so, another attempt to cast your dilemma upon me. I refuse to arrest this lady."

"At your peril," rejoined Stettenheim.

"Don't dictate to me, sir," answered Falkenberg with *hauteur*.

I have received special instructions from Vienna not to arrest women for political offences, unless under very special circumstances. An arrest of this woman would probably cause an *émeute*. I choose to exercise my discretion—I refuse the arrest! Come, sir," he continued, "as you compel me to assume a peremptory tone, I desire the escort of your men forthwith."

And now the acceptance of that final refuge was forced upon him, against the bare thought of which his soul had revolted with abhorrence—the refuge of shame and dishonour, which he had striven by every desperate means in his power to evade—the barrack-room—his own chamber in the barracks. Aye, and brought thither in such secrecy as might avoid an open contravention of military rules, and yet with unavoidable publicity—with innuendoes and scoffs—thither, where women worthy of shame and degradation, had been greeted by shame and degradation—thither, to such an asylum of disgrace, was this woman of his true love to be conveyed—the woman he honoured with the highest honour and reverence, holding her worthy, in her spotless innocence, of the ministration of angels.

Stettenheim, without making any reply to Falkenberg, gave the order for the soldiers to hold themselves in readiness to leave the palazzo. It was necessary to

pass some twenty yards across a small piazza to the canal; a crowd of angry and excited Venetians had gathered in front of the palace, women as well as men. Angry cries of imprecation on Vittoria, verifying but too truly Falkenberg's statement, were audible in the saloon. The soldiers were directed to clear a space to the water, and with some difficulty the crowd was forced back. As soon as the lieutenant in command had reported that matters were prepared, Stettenheim addressed Falkenberg and the lieutenant in words of marked significance.

"I request you, gentlemen, to remain in this room, while I enter the chamber of the Countess Vittoria Contarini."

He knocked for admission at the door; no answer was given, and after a short pause he entered, leaving the door wide open. Vittoria had scarcely moved since he left the room; physical prostration and insensibility, rather than sleep; there was evidence of fever, too, when he touched her

hand. He fell on his knees at her bedside, and whispered in her ear the terrible position in which they were both placed. She did not seem to be able to give heed to his words, but he did tell her—he could not refrain from giving utterance to the feelings that burnt at his heart—he did tell her, that his life from thenceforth was dedicated to her, that his love was so strong, that one day it would be able to vindicate her honour from all reproach: that the sole object of his life would be gratitude to her, for the life she had saved.

“Oh, Vittoria!” he cried with fervour, “through evil report and sore calumny, shielded by my love, which your sacrifice has made pure and noble—to honour, and reverence, and noble reputation. Come, dearest, you can believe in me.”

She could not follow his words, but believe in him she could; she let him raise her from her bed, let him enfold her in his cloak; and so, half supported, half carried, he led her to the door of her cham-

ber. Significant smiles gathered on the half-averted faces of the two men who were waiting for them in the saloon, but he alone felt the bitterness; she was unconscious of everything but her faith in him.

Across the piazza to the water, with the howling crowd cursing her as a traitress to the Venetian cause, and almost forcing in the line of the soldiers in their mad fury—missiles flung at them both, but he warded off all danger from her—and worse than missiles, one loathsome word of disgrace, hissed and shrieked by women and men. He drew the cloak over her head to hush the accursed sound from her ears, but he himself writhed beneath that word of shame cast on her innocence; and so they gained the gondola in safety, though the soldiers had a hard matter to stem an ugly rush of the crowd on the water steps.

At last, safely away from the narrow water streets, into the open water! Oh, the balmy sweetness of the night! And Venice, that city of inherent fascination

and romance, fittest scene for love's back-ground, and a glorious Italian moon in all its fulness of glory, fit light to illuminate love's illusions, and the gentle swing of the gondola, and lulling music of soft ripple at the prow. Many a light word had he whispered, and many a false vow had he uttered in past hours like the present. Vittoria lay almost insensible in his arms, and he clasped her burning hand in his, but now the words he spoke, came from the depths of the heart, and not from the throat, and the false vows were changed to earnest prayers. Marvellous change from the life of cynicism to the life of faith ; and very strange did it seem to him as he looked down on her fair, pale face, with all the marks of painful combat on her brow, lying in the unrest of exhaustion on his bosom : passing strange, that the girl to whom he had offered the deepest insult, should be the only being in the world who had perfect faith in his sincerity and honour ; and beautiful as was her face even in its distress and weariness, far more

beautiful in his new feelings was the noble spirit dwelling beneath the beauty of her countenance, and beneath the depth of her glorious eyes. It seemed, indeed, that she must be some bright being of old legend, compelled to assume human form ; for so highly did he estimate her character, that he could scarcely believe she was really a woman—a woman to love and reverence—hard even in his new faith, to attribute such excellence to womanhood. Very strange, also, to look back from the present to the past—that past, long, long past—and yet in the ordering of time little more than two hours past ; but emotion can count a year in a heart-beat, and many a heart-beat had there been, in that progress from cynicism to faith, from contempt to unbounded admiration.

And so they arrived, in due course, safely at the barrack ; and then the final consummation of all disgrace—she was conveyed half-secretly to his chamber and laid upon his bed. Two German women, soldiers'

wives, women unworthy of entering her presence—but at least they were women—came and watched her; into their care did he solemnly commend her, with promises of lavish payment; and the regimental surgeon presently came, under protest, to afford medical assistance. Stettenheim waited outside his own chamber door, pacing up and down the corridor with the greatest anxiety to learn the medical report, and he prayed earnestly for the woman he loved, using unwonted prayers furbished up from the old store chambers of childish memory, and according in their innocence with her purity. At last the doctor left the room. He shook his head gravely. “The wound was nothing—but fever, the brain—they must hope for the best, but he feared the reason might be affected.” When the doctor saw the tears rush into Stettenheim’s eyes, and marked the look of despair in his countenance, and the tremor which shot through his whole frame, he marvelled greatly. “This man really loves,” he said

to himself. “A thousand pities that love and shame should be linked together.”

And so it came to pass, that from first to last, in the course of about two hours, more or less, first one person and then another came to believe in Vittoria’s shame; and finally, throughout the whole city of Venice, there only remained one being who believed in her virtue, and purity, and nobleness—the man, who at the commencement of those very two hours, had striven to accomplish her degradation, the man, whose life she had redeemed, and rendered worthy of her own noble love.

END OF VOL. II.

